

THE WORLD'S LONGEST RUNNING MAGAZINE OF FANTASTIC FILMS & TELEVISION

STARBLURST

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GORE AND MORE!

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ON SHAZAM! FURY OF THE GODS

DRAGON'S LAIR

REVISTING THE ARCADE CLASSIC

65

GO BEHIND THE SCENES OF ADAM DRIVER'S
TIME-BENDING DINOSAUR THRILLER

+ MUCH MORE!

CELEBRATING 40 YEARS OF

RETURN^{OF}_{THE} JEDI

ISSUE
481



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EDITORIAL

Has it really been 40 years?!

For those of us who can remember experiencing it during its original release, it's a particularly difficult detail to comprehend, and not just because it immediately reminds us of how flippin' old we've all gone and gotten! Putting these overwhelming notions of mortality aside, I can still recall that time like it was yesterday; I was stunned at what was unfolding before my eyes - I'd never seen anything like it. Nobody had! No matter how much of my pocket money I threw at this thing, I was never satisfied. And who else got RSI from all that vigorous stick-wagging? Agony. But even after all that, I never did manage to rescue Princess Daphne. *Dragon's Lair* was fab, wasn't it! And with 2023 marking its four-decade anniversary, how could we pass up the opportunity to delve into the fascinating history of the arcade classic to bring you an awesome retrospective! Now I'm sure there was something else celebrating a 40th anniversary this year, too...

I jest, of course! (Not about loving *Dragon's Lair* or the amazing feature by Ken Wynne on page 66, or the crushing anxieties about my own mortality, that's all for reals.) I'm goofing around because I know I'll likely get a little emotional talking about *Return of the Jedi*; opening with a silly gag just helped delay the inevitable. I don't think it's an overstatement to make that without this film I wouldn't be typing these words now, a mere few hours before another sensational issue of STARBURST is finally sent to the printers (apologies in advance for any typos here btw, the deadline has been petty gruelling and I haven't slept in quiet a while). Seeing *Return of the Jedi* as a youngling left an indelible mark on my soul, setting me off on a path that I've never strayed from. It opened up my world to the wonder and endless possibilities of not just *Star Wars*, but movies themselves!

Jedi is the very first film I ever remember seeing at the cinema, and the memories associated with that particular trip, alongside my Dad and Grandad, are still vivid; and not just because I was required to be secretly smuggled out of my house under cover of darkness for fear of altering my younger sister of our exciting plans (it seems cruel, but she had a gnarly cough, so we were protecting our fellow cinemagoers from going apeshit). There's also the memory of my dear Grandad making me an Imperial Blaster out of wood in his garden shed when we couldn't afford the official Kenner one from the toy store. And how about that cherished memory of my Dad putting me on his shoulders and zipping me through the overgrown wheat stalks in a nearby field, pretending to be a speeder bike. (He thinks I made that story up whenever I mention it, but I swear it happened!) Probably actually best forgotten is the tale of my Mum finding me mid-sleepwalk, jumping up and down on my bed while blowing kisses to the rancor poster that adorned my wall. (I think she made this story up every time she mentions it, but she swears it happened!) The memories *Return of the Jedi* conjures are countless. And naturally, that's nothing unique about me - if you're a fan of *Star Wars*,

then you'll no doubt have them in abundance, too. And I'll wager a lot of those memories revolve around family and friends. Make you smile. There's something magical about that.

See, I told you I'd get all sentimental.

Is there a better way to pay our respects to a movie reaching a milestone anniversary than to all get together to share those stories and show our love? Maybe we should invite some talent from around the world to join in; *Star Wars* writers, podcasters, YouTubers, and other such artists who eat, sleep, and breathe that galaxy far, far away to find out what *Return of the Jedi* means to them. Sounds like a plan! Turn to page 8 and come join the party. Yub Nub!

To complement our *Return of the Jedi* coverage, I also thought it would be nice to pay homage to one of my personal favourite STARBURST covers of all time (Issue 59, right), with some beautiful new artwork by one of our gifted graphic designers, Grant Kempster. How cool is that Luke!

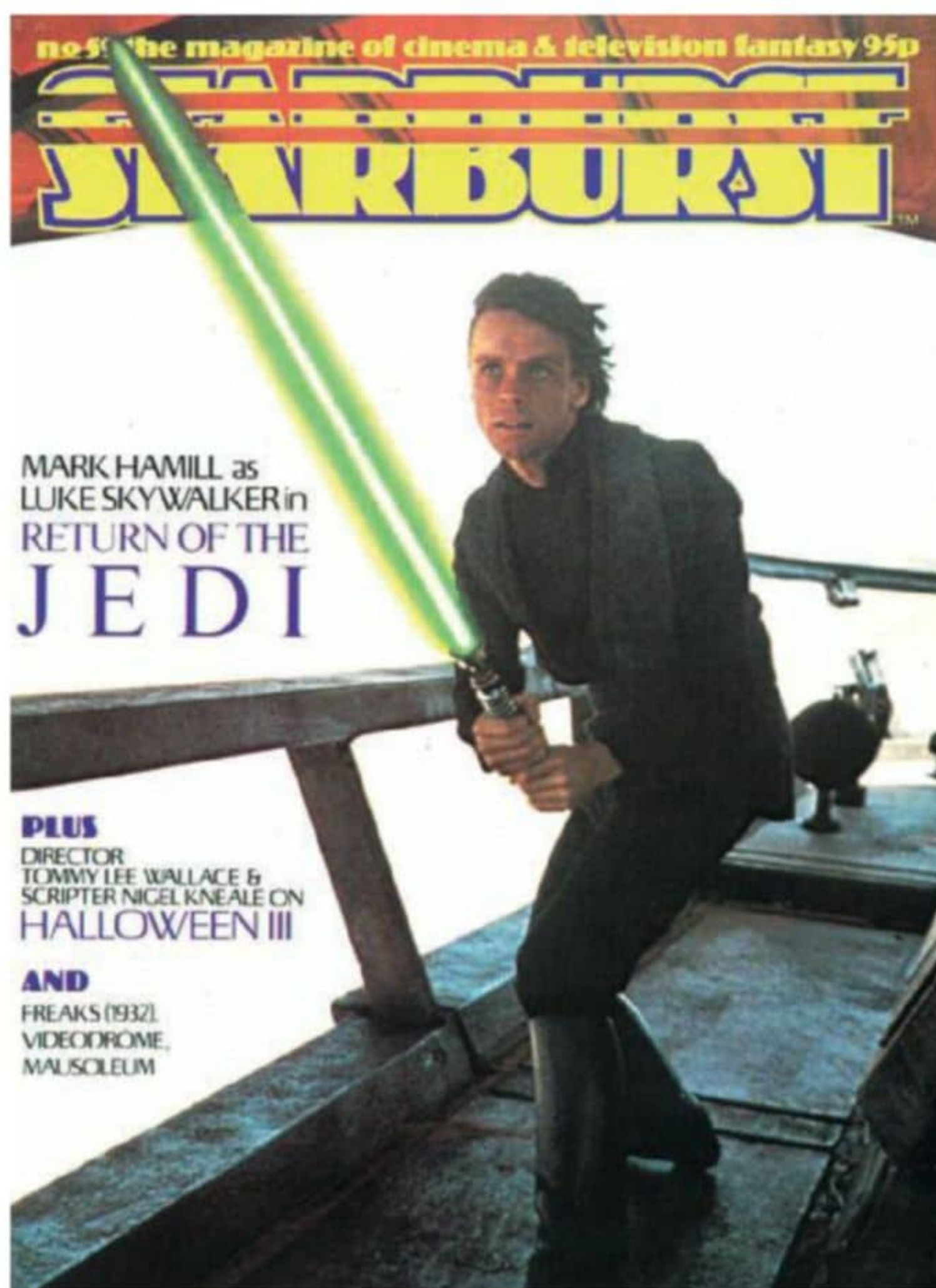
As with every issue of STARBURST, there's something for absolutely everybody within these pages, so even if you don't count yourself a fan of the Force, then don't worry! (That said, if you're not a *Star Wars* fan, you've probably stopped reading this Editorial by now. Ah well.) Horror hounds are particularly well catered for in this issue, in fact! Actress Alyssa Sutherland spills her guts to us on the making of *Evil Dead Rise*; Martin Unsworth's *Horror Obscura* is resurrected for a brand-new run; *Monsters University* is a new regular creature feature by Reviews Editor Laura Potier; and we get a behind-the-scenes peak at Troma's latest twisted tale, *Eating Miss Campbell*. We've also got a similar lowdown on the new sci-fi dinosaur mash-up 65 courtesy of our interview with its writer/director team Scott Beck and Bryan Woods of *A Quiet Place* fame. Find out what it was like working on a movie their cameraman deemed 'tougher than the time he shot *The Revenant*', what Stephen King adaptation is up next from them, and whether they enjoyed collaborating with Ben Solo himself, Adam Driver.

And just like that, we're right back around to *Star Wars*. There's no escaping it, and I'm quite alright with that. In fact, I take all that whinging about mortality back - what an absolute honour it's been to grow old alongside one of the greatest movies ever made.

There I go again.

Right, until next issue, keep watching *Star Wars* the weird and wonderful!

Kris Heys



STARBURST MAGAZINE #59, FIRST PUBLISHED IN JULY 1983



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What better way to start this issue's tribute to RETURN OF THE JEDI on its 40th anniversary than to follow the Ewoks' lead and throw a big ol' knees-up! We may not be lucky enough to have Bright Tree Village in which to party through, but people have still come far and wide to share their love of the film with us. You all know the STARBURST crew by now, but allow us to introduce our SPECIAL GUESTS joining us for this spirited conversation in honour of a major STAR WARS milestone....



KRISTIN BAVER

Associate Editor of *StarWars.com*, host of the wonderful *This Week! in Star Wars*, and author of numerous publications dealing with the galaxy far, far away, including *Star Wars: 100 Objects*, in stores from April 4th!



JASON GIBNER & GABE BOTT

Creators of the ever-brilliant *Blast Points Podcast*, the always hilarious, always informative weekly show that revels in exploring *Star Wars* topics big and small.



TRICIA BARR

Author of multiple *Star Wars* reference books – including some of our favourites, *Ultimate Star Wars* and the canonical *Star Wars: The Dark Side* – as well as creator of *FANgirlblog.com*



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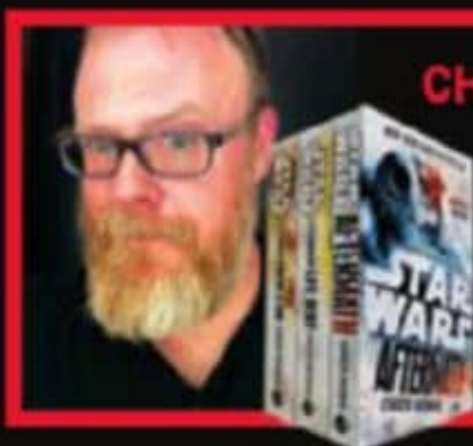
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Writer at *Star Wars Insider*, *Star Wars Celebration* stage host, and Editor-in-Chief of Fantha Tracks.



CHARLOTTE ERRITY & CAITLIN PLESHER

Co-hosts on the popular *Star Wars* podcast *Skytalkers*. If you're attending *Star Wars Celebration 2023* in London this April, make sure you swing by the Holonet News Stage and catch them live!



CHUCK WENDIG

Author of the excellent canon-expanding trilogy of books, *Star Wars: Aftermath*.



ALEX DAMON

Creator and host of YouTube's go-to channel for all things GFFA, the unrivalled *Star Wars Explained*.



ADAM CHRISTOPHER

New York Times bestselling author of the essential post-ROTJ novel, *Star Wars: Shadow of the Sith* (finally in paperback from March 30th).



BRIAN HERRING

BB-8 lead puppeteer.



ALAN DEAN FOSTER

Award-winning author of the original *Star Wars* novelisation and its sequel, *Splinter of the Mind's Eye*.



JED SHEPHERD

Executive producer and screenwriter of horror hits *Host* and *Dashcam*. *Star Wars* fan!



KELLY KNOX

Star Wars crafts connoisseur and entertainment writer regularly dabbling in those other worlds of DC and Marvel, too. Follow her on Twitter @kelly_knox for a daily dose of *Star Wars* goofs, and keep 'em peeled for her new release, *Star Wars: Conversation Cards - 125 Questions for Dinner Parties, Movie Marathons, and More*, on sale July 18th.



DR SORCHA NÍ FHLAINN

Senior Lecturer in Film Studies and American Studies and a founding member of the Manchester Centre for Gothic Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University. Author of *Postmodern Vampires: Film, Fiction and Popular Culture* (Palgrave, 2019). *Star Wars* fan!

NEIL LIVESEY

Organiser of the *Star Wars Fan Fun Day*.

MARTIN KEELER

Curator of The Zuveum – the only museum dedicated to our hero Constable Zuvio!

JAMES BURNS

Editor-in-Chief of *Jedi News*, podcaster, and writer.

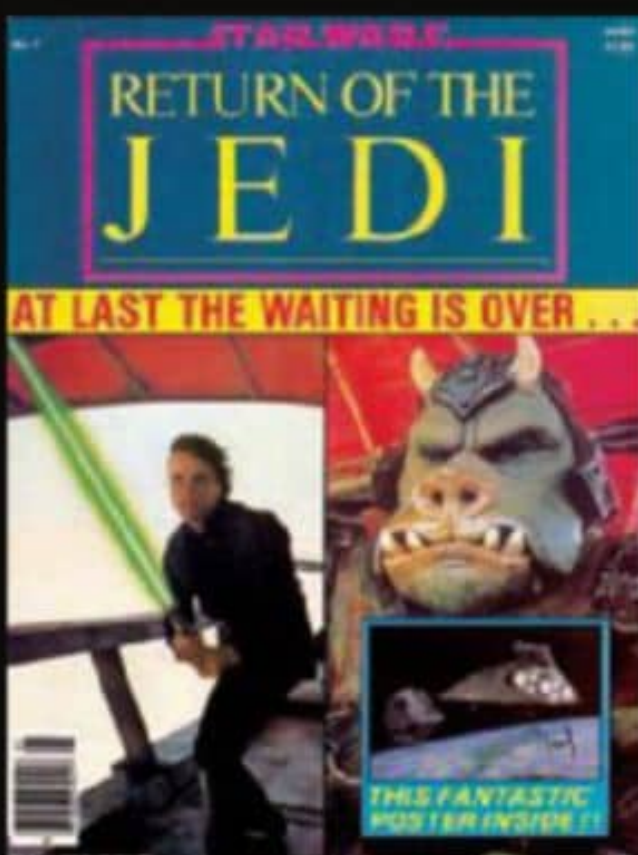
THE FIRST VIEWING

Whether we saw it on the big-screen back in '83 or discovered it decades later on home video, we'll never forget experiencing *RETURN OF THE JEDI* for that first time....



Mike Dean (Starburst): I remember watching Saturday morning TV - either *Tiswas* or *No. 73* - and they announced they were going to be showing a *Return of the Jedi* clip later in the show. I'd not seen anything of *Jedi* at this point, not even on *Film 83*, so I was waiting with bated breath. It was eventually time... Han Solo creeps up behind what I can only describe as *the coolest looking stormtrooper that I could ever have imagined!* Han steps on a branch alerting this iconic foot soldier of his presence, resulting in a right old rumble, to then see another biker scout make his escape on the coolest looking vehicle that I could ever have imagined! I stood there in shock, wondering who I could speak to about what I'd just seen...

Mark Newbold (Fantha Tracks): I probably shouldn't admit this, but I saw *Jedi* before it came out in the UK. A friend's dad worked in the Middle East and somehow got hold of a pirate copy, which I borrowed and watched multiple times. I was convinced that Lucasfilm would find out and, like the girl from *The Ring*, would somehow get their revenge!



for this one. When I read *The Empire Strikes Back* a couple of days before seeing the film, I was outraged

Robin Pierce (Starburst): During the releases of the original trilogy, I had a habit of reading the novelisations before seeing the film. And I was light years beyond desperate

that Han Solo had been frozen and the situation left unresolved. I grabbed the paperback of *Jedi* as soon as I saw it on the shelves and devoured it. Next up, the now-iconic commemorative magazine that was released. Stage 3 was seeing the film as soon as I could! As far as we were concerned back in '83, this was it - the last chapter in the series. It had a lot to live up to, especially following the more downbeat *Empire*. I remember leaving the cinema elated that the story had ended and that the good guys had won - but simultaneously saddened that something I had enjoyed and looked forward to for the past six years had come to an end. Little did we know!

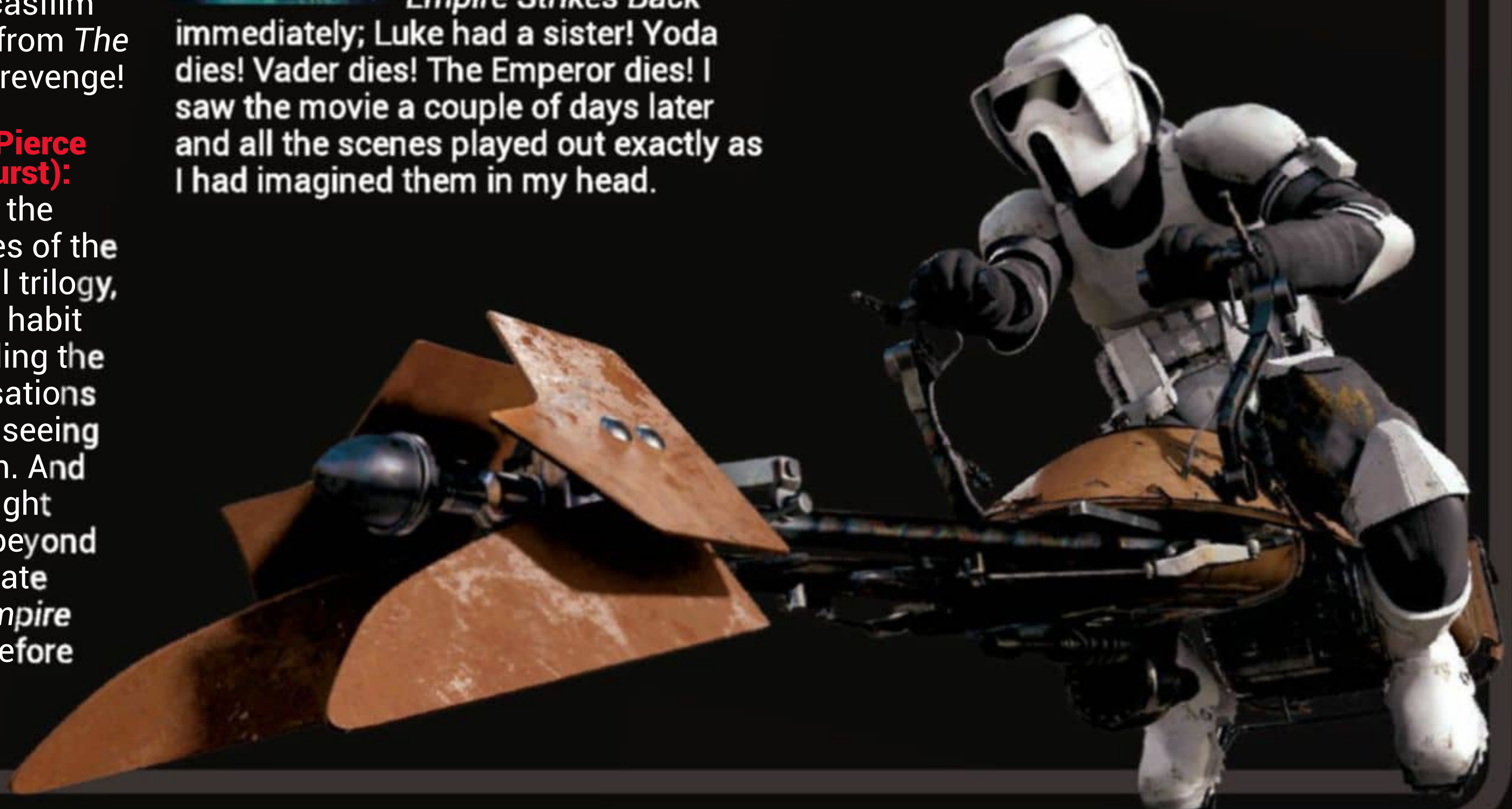


Neil Livesey (Star Wars Fan Fun Day): I too grabbed the book as soon as it was released and read it in between work meetings. I had to know the unanswered questions from *The Empire Strikes Back* immediately; Luke had a sister! Yoda dies! Vader dies! The Emperor dies! I saw the movie a couple of days later and all the scenes played out exactly as I had imagined them in my head.



Jason Gibner (Blast Points): I first saw the trailer as a kid when I went to see *Annie* in the movie theatre with my grandmother and sister. I was amazed. I remember seeing the speeder bikes whizzing through the forest in the trailer and just being blown away. I was seven when it eventually came out, so I was the perfect age to be obsessed with the film.

Tricia Barr (Author): I'd seen *A New Hope* and *The Empire Strikes Back* in their original theatrical release, so I was already a *Star Wars* fan eager to see *Return of the Jedi* in 1983. My high school best friend and I were both dying to know what happened to Han Solo. While movie spoilers weren't a big phenomenon like they are now, we did find ways to get details on the movie - it involved writing letters, which seems so strange in this day and age. My teacher let me out of school early and I waited in line for one of the first showings. It was such a communal experience. It was so much fun!





Chuck Wendig (Author): I saw the movie opening week at our local movie theatre. Lines wrapped around the building. It was maybe the best thing I'd ever seen.



Kelly Knox (Author): *Return of the Jedi* is the first *Star Wars* movie I can remember seeing in the theatre. I can picture it very clearly because the film strip snapped in the middle of the showing! Just as Paploo stole the

speeder bike, the screen went white, and the audience flipped out. I remember enjoying the movie up to that point, but I can't recall if we got to see the end of it...

Gabe Bott (Blast Points): I got home from the theatre and was just buzzing with excitement from seeing it. I vividly remember immediately grabbing my plastic baseball bat and walking around the neighbourhood swinging it like it was a lightsaber!

Brian Herring (Puppeteer): I saw *Jedi* on Wednesday, June 1st in 1983 at the Leicester Square Theatre in London. It was a special triple bill screening for the

Star Wars fan club just before the film was released. My long-suffering dad took myself and my school friend; we were utterly blown away!

Adam Christopher (Author): It was the first *Star Wars* movie I actually remember going to the cinema for, with my best friend from school. On the way out from the cinema to the car park, we re-enacted Luke and Vader's iconic lightsaber battle. I can still remember this like it was yesterday.



Kristin Baver (Author): I think the first time may have been after my parents bought me and my sister the VHS box set. Of the three films, that was the only one we watched so much that we actually wore out the tape and had to go to the mall in search of a replacement! I was already a huge fan of *Star Wars*, but for years it was my favourite of the original trilogy.

Dr Sorcha Ni Fhlainn (Author): I remember loving the film from a young age, re-watching it a lot on video rental, but interestingly I discovered a few years later that I'd watched the original *Star Wars* trilogy in the wrong order - so it always made sense that Vader was Luke and Leia's father!



Jonathan Hipkiss (Fantha Tracks): A family member gave me VHS copies of the films in 1995. Having been born in only '91, Roman Numerals meant nothing to me, so I began with *Empire*, then moved onto *Return of the Jedi*. I have a visceral memory of pure joy seeing *Jedi* for the first time. An incredible sense of adventure, of euphoria, and innocence.

Caitlin Plesher (Skytalkers): My co-host Charlotte was the one who introduced me to *Star Wars* when we became friends in middle school. We watched through all the films chronologically, *The Phantom Menace* through to



Return of the Jedi. I don't remember the specifics of that night I watched it for the first time, but I do remember a lot of the feelings surrounding that movie that I still get today. *Return of the Jedi*, to me, is such an earnest movie. That feeling of happiness of seeing Luke, Leia, and Han all together, adventuring as they zip around Endor with the Ewoks, and the bittersweetness of Luke and Vader's relationship. Satisfied is how I always feel about *Return of the Jedi* and I imagine that was my initial reaction as the credits rolled the first time I watched it. I love the ending of this movie, everything falls into place. To see all our heroes happy and together at the end means so much.

Alex Damon (Star Wars Explained): I was eight or nine when I first saw it. I know my parents let me stay obsessed with *A New Hope* for as long as I could until they revealed there were sequels. When I saw *Jedi*, it quickly became my

favourite film - but I said that about every new *Star Wars* movie I saw when I was younger! I loved the speeder bike chase. I loved the Battle of Endor. And I remember getting chills when Darth Vader saved Luke, and not really understanding why that happened. It was the strongest emotional reaction I think I had to a film at that age.

Charlotte Errity (Skytalkers): I first watched *Return of the Jedi* with my mom, who really got me into *Star Wars* when I was around nine or ten. She loved it, especially the redemption at the end and the Ewoks - I really remember her being so enthusiastic about those two elements, which probably meant that I was destined to be obsessed with both after the movie ended. *Return of the Jedi* really stuck with me from that viewing and I'm pretty sure I claimed it to be my favourite at the end, probably due to the sheer amount of joy - and weirdness! - that it effuses.

James Hanton (Starburst): My dad bought my brother and me copies of the original trilogy on DVD; two-disc versions that had both the remastered and original cinematic versions - even as a kid I knew which ones were better! I remember feeling a bit weirded out by the somewhat colourful nature of Jabba's Palace, but loved seeing Luke Skywalker wield his own lightsaber for the first time as a now fully-fledged Jedi Knight - not unlike the thrill of seeing him in Season 2 of *The Mandalorian*! It felt slightly strange seeing the original story come to a close and, while it is a good ending, I remember feeling slightly deflated it was all over. How wrong I was, of course!

Jed Shepherd (Producer): Ever since I can remember, my nickname has been Jedi. My first primary school teacher used to call me it. At the time I used to think it was derogatory, but now I think she was trying to pay me a compliment! The first time I watched the film I was probably five or six and I'm pretty sure it was my gateway into the whole *Star Wars* universe. I was instantly obsessed and really never stopped thinking about it!

Luke Spafford (Starburst): I was born in 1983 - incidentally I'm named after Luke Skywalker, allegedly having been conceived during a screening of *The Empire Strikes Back* on VHS - so *Jedi* would have been a few years later. I don't remember seeing it for the first time, but it's always been a part of my life and, for me, the favourite among all the *Star Wars* films.



THE PRIZED POSSESSIONS

Our love for STAR WARS transcends just the stories themselves, resulting in magnificent collections of memorabilia years in the making. But what's the one piece of RETURN OF THE JEDI merch that means the most?



Kristin Baver (Author): Hands down, it's my vintage Kenner Jabba the Hutt figure. By the time I became a fan, that line was off the shelves, replaced by The Power of the Force amid the Special Edition launch in the late 1990s. I found that original Jabba at a flea market in great condition but missing all the accessories. I added him to my other action figure collection and then spent quite a bit of time searching for Salacious B. Crumb, eventually scoring one at that same antiques market still sealed in a plastic baggie!

Jed Shepherd (Producer): I have a Salacious Crumb plush toy from the '90s, which has followed me across many moves. It's covered in dust and coffee, but like he did for Jabba, he makes me laugh every time I accidentally unearth him from a box. Just look at his face!



Chuck Wendig (Author): I still have my rancor action figure. There's still another action figure stuck inside his belly. I'm not even sure who it is at this point.



John Townsend (Starburst): As a kid I had pretty much everything you could get. Saturdays were trips to a toy store in my hometown to see what new figure I could

afford, but oddly one of my favourites - and it's still in a box at my parents' - is the Rancor Keeper figure. In the UK, he was only available as a mail-away; you had to collect tokens from the card backs of other figures and send them off with the cost of postage and packaging.

Martin Keeler (The Zuveum): I remember my vintage Klaatu action figure was the last one I needed to complete the whole set of figures - until additional waves were released - and it was the first time I'd completed a set. I can still remember the feeling of satisfaction when I finally found him on the peg of my local toyshop!



James Burns (Fantha Tracks): Jabba's sail barge, the Khetanna, was a toy that we all wanted to exist back in the day, so it was great to finally get it in 2019 through Hasbro's first ever HasLab crowdfunded project. Also, I was gifted a *Revenge of the Jedi* crew cap from 1982, before the film's name was changed, and that's very special to me as it takes me back to my childhood and simpler times.



Alex Damon (Star Wars Explained): I own a *Revenge of the Jedi* poster that's pretty neat, but I think my favourite piece of *Return of the Jedi* merchandise is one of my Darth

Vader action figures from The Power of the Force line. You could take the top of his helmet off, and I thought that was awesome as a kid.

Kelly Knox (Author): A Don Post Darth Vader helmet from '83 is my most prized *Star Wars* item in my collection. It survived summers in a Texas attic in the 1980s and a move across the country to Seattle many years later. Only a few *Star Wars* items from my childhood have stayed with me over the years, and it's one of them. Although I probably won't put the helmet on ever again, because who knows what took up residence inside it during its time in the attic...



Caitlin Plesher (Skytalkers): A recent addition to my collection was something I purchased at *Star Wars Celebration 2022* in Anaheim. Charlotte and I went to our first poster collecting panel and became so interested in the world of *Star Wars* posters! Lo and behold, on the showroom floor later that day, I came across a *Return of the Jedi* movie poster from the 35-year theatrical re-release and really fell in love with it. I love the artwork on it, particularly Leia's. It felt like serendipity, so, of course, it had to be mine!



Jason Gibner (Blast Points): I have a huge *Return of the Jedi* poster with the classic image of the hands on the saber. That's my all-time favourite *Star Wars*

poster and it's directly across from me every time I record the podcast.

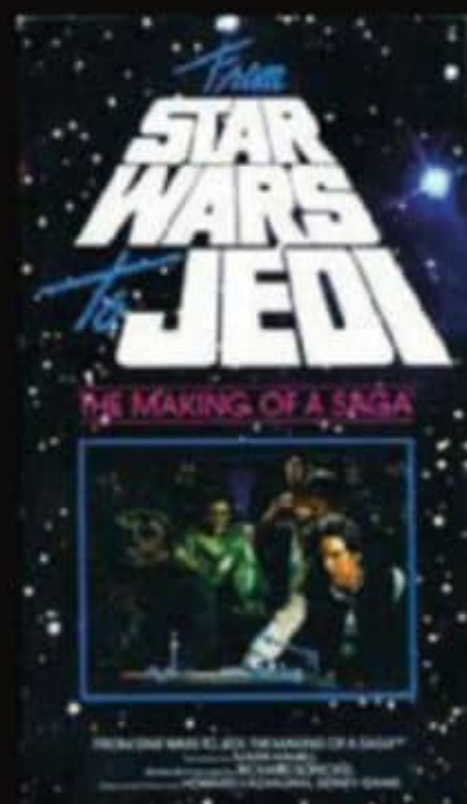


Charlotte Errity (Skytalkers): The first *Star Wars* toy I ever got – and they're now my favourite thing to purchase – was a plush Wicket the Ewok. It started a journey of collecting all cuddly, weird *Star Wars* creatures and I'm very grateful to Wicket for that!

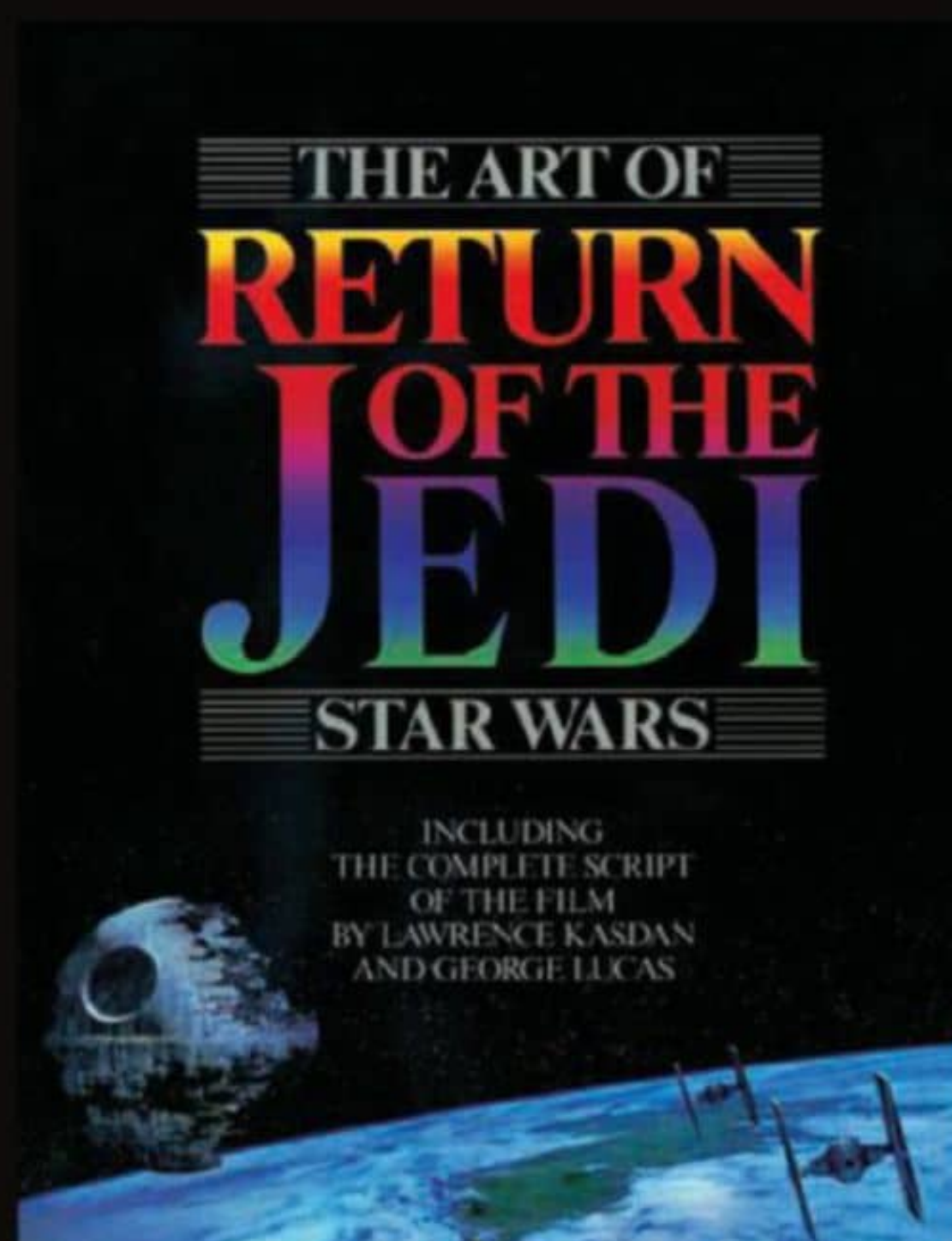
Vanessa Berben (Starburst): Growing up, I was obsessed with the Ewoks. I've watched *Caravan of Courage* and *Battle for Endor* about a million times, and I never missed an episode of the animated series. I also had a stuffed Wicket I took everywhere that was misplaced over the years, to much heartbreak. Years ago, I was at a rummage sale and stumbled onto a mint-condition Wicket that I quickly snatched up for an absolute steal. I've kept it in pristine condition ever since and occasionally take it out of storage to give him a snuggle. My husband thinks I'm crazy and that we should give it to our children. But that's never going to happen!



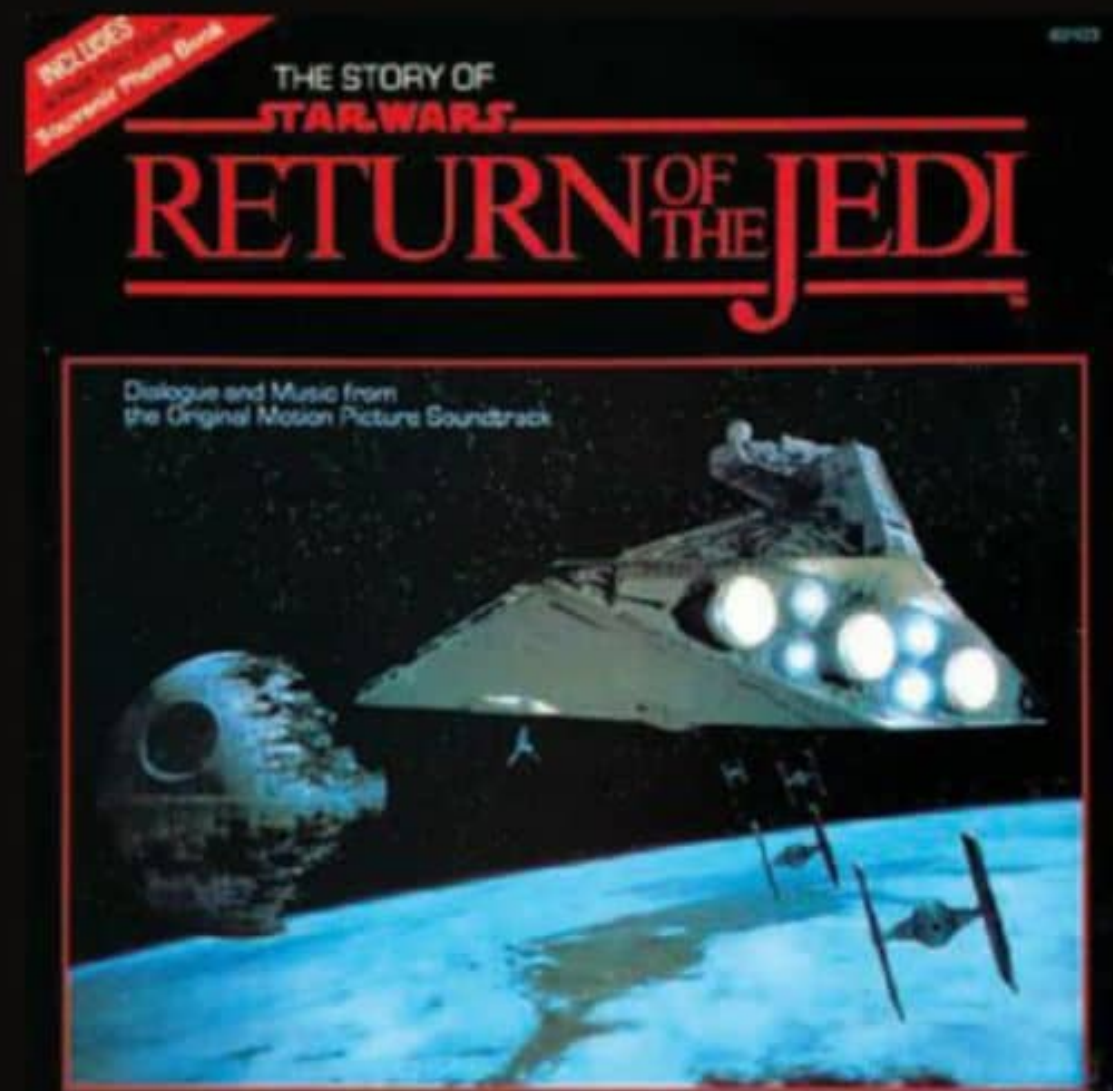
Jonathan Hipkiss (Fantha Tracks): The 3.75" Power of the Force II biker scout and speeder bike. This was the last present my Grandad brought me before he passed away in 1999 and while it holds all those sentimental feelings and emotions... boy oh boy did this thing get played with. The head of the figure was on a joint so if you flicked it with your finger, it would snap back quite quickly and look like he'd been shot by a blaster bolt. I played for hours by myself with this toy, flying him around the living room and exploding the bike. Thank you, Grandad. I'm smiling all over again.



Robin Pierce (Starburst): There was a 90 minute 'making of' documentary that was shown on TV in 1983 called *From Star Wars to Jedi: The Making of a Saga*. I'd taped it at the time and watched it repeatedly. I'd hoped it would've been included as an extra feature on one of the many, many releases of the saga on disc by now, but it's never been released. I treasure that VHS.



Mark Newbold (Fantha Tracks): I'd had some money for my birthday, enough to get together some postal orders and order a copy of *The Art of Return of the Jedi*, which I read and re-read again so often that the glue on the spine gave out, turning it into more of a portfolio than a book. Years later, I was lucky enough to meet Ralph McQuarrie, and while I didn't bring *The Art of Return of the Jedi* to get signed, I did bring *The Art of Star Wars* and an old issue of *Bantha Tracks*, which he signed for free. It was *The Art of Return of the Jedi* that really showed me the power of his artwork, inspiring me to start diving deeper into *Star Wars* literature and find out more about how they made these incredible movies.



Brian Herring (Puppeteer): I have a picture disc vinyl LP of the story of the movie that I bought on my first trip to the US in 1985. I played it to death!

Adam Christopher (Author): I don't have any original *Return of the Jedi* merch anymore, but my favourite piece was actually a plastic cup from Pizza Hut. It was huge, and had the *Jedi* poster artwork printed around it. Over the years, the dishwasher removed the printing, and it became a big weird white plastic cup, so it was thrown away. But if I could ever find an original Pizza Hut cup, it would have pride of place in my collection!

JD Gillam (Starburst): Like an idiot, I sold all my *Star Wars* toys – a collection that included every action figure bar three, a ton of vehicles, and even the Ewok Village – for just £15 when I was about twelve, because I'd recently got into horror and thought the toys were now too childish for me. It took a huge king-size mattress box to put them all in. I still have nightmares to this day about that. £15!!!



Alan Dean Foster (Author): I don't own anything. Early on, Charley Lippincott, who handled PR and licensing for Lucasfilm, offered me my pick of the promo material for the first film – T-shirts, program books, posters, etc. My response: "What would I want with any of this stuff?" As Daffy Duck would say, "Shoot me now."

THE ICONS

RETURN OF THE JEDI boasts an unparalleled roster of exceptional characters, and we've all got one that preoccupies our minds above all....



Chuck Wendig (Author): I love Nien Nunb a lot because I still don't know how to say his name and he basically has like, layers of lunchmeat turkey for a face, but at the end of the day how can you not love the perfectly-named, perfectly-scripted, perfectly-everything Admiral Ackbar? Him wheeling around in that chair barking, "It's a trap!" Iconic. As the kids say, we stan. Do the kids still say that? Hmmm.



Jed Shepherd (Producer): That overgrown fish-looking guy is incredibly important to the whole saga. I'd kill to see a standalone Ackbar film!

Adam Christopher (Author): He was the action figure I wanted right after seeing the movie. He looked so amazingly alien.



Iain Robertson (Starburst): The rancor. He could've just been a simple monster, but the way they inject him with personality is genius. I recently had the good fortune to interview the legendary Phil Tippett for our site and got to tell him just how much his creations, including the rancor, meant to me. Magnificent!



Tricia Barr (Author): Leia is my favourite. For a young lady in the early '80s, she wasn't like any other character on screen in my eyes. Carrie Fisher is what makes her so special to me. She was wise beyond her years, strong yet vulnerable, and all those traits made their way to Princess Leia. To find out Leia could be a Jedi like Luke... I lived on that revelation for years until we finally saw it come true in the books.



Jason Gibner (Blast Points): From his mysterious hooded introduction walking into Jabba's Palace to his incredible bravery and sacrifice in the final duel, I always think of Luke when I think of *Return of the Jedi*.

John Derbyshire (Starburst): Once I'd seen the Holy Trilogy as a kid, all I ever wanted was to see Luke in full Jedi Master mode in any subsequent movies. There were always rumblings of a next chapter which would see Skywalker become one of the greatest Jedi of all time and start up his own training academy. In *Jedi*, the opening moments made it immediately clear that Luke was now a fully formed Jedi badass, and that was something only further emphasised



by the final act. Plus, the Jedi wardrobe for Luke was magnificent!

Anthony Oleszkiewicz (Starburst): As a kid, I dressed up as Luke - I had a black robe, a cloak, a cheap belt from a cowboy costume, and one solitary baseball glove over the hand that gripped my green plastic lightsaber. Luke has always been one of my favourite characters in his heroism and his want for something more.



Jonathan Hipkiss (Fantha Tracks): He's the epitome of the hero we all strive to be. The seriousness of his responsibility is beautifully drawn out, yet his unwavering and faultless compassion is something that we could use a lot more of in today's world.

Caitlin Plesher (Skytalkers): Next to *The Last Jedi*, my favourite moments of Luke are in *Return of the Jedi*. The film is the culmination of his character arc in the Original Trilogy and it's so satisfying to see how far he has come in these three movies. I love his resoluteness - his unshakable belief in his father and the goodness that is within Vader. Luke's love for his father is what the entire saga is leading to and *Return of the Jedi* brings his story here to a beautiful and poignant close. I think now, having all these other characters and their relationships with Anakin/Vader as a comparison point - like Obi-Wan and Ahsoka's - it magnifies just how extraordinary Luke's love for his father is. To me, Luke Skywalker is the embodiment of *Star Wars* and everything that makes it so enduring.



Charlotte Errity (Skytalkers):

I completely agree with Caitlin, Luke's character in *Return of the Jedi* is probably my favourite iteration of him in the original trilogy - his general coolness under pressure is instantly fantastic. Plus, you have to love the new green lightsaber!

Mark Newbold (Fantha Tracks):

Empire, to me, was Han Solo's film, and while *Episode V* saw Luke make huge strides towards his destiny and *that* moment on Bespin with Dadakin Vader, he didn't own the film like Solo did. *Jedi* was Luke's film; his dark arrival at Jabba's palace - was he a good guy, or had he turned? His boldness and bravery at not only confronting his father again, but taking it to Palpatine on the Death Star! It's the most complete Luke we ever got, and that's why he steals the film for me.



Kelly Knox (Author): *Return of the Jedi* was the first time we really got to see the Emperor in person and at the height of his Emperor-ness. As a kid, I adored every smug line he spoke and worked hard on my Palpatine impression. It involved a lot of frowning.

James Hanton (Starburst): It's got to be the Emperor for me, too. Not only because I have a Scottish link there with Ian McDiarmid, but because he is a truly terrifying villain, and because my appreciation of the character has increased dramatically since I first saw

the film. This is helped somewhat by having more of a backstory and history in the prequel era, but also because he puts a whole new spin on Darth Vader. Dave Filoni talked about Vader as someone who seems terrifying but really has lost everything and is empty inside. It's this that's allowed the Emperor to wrap him around his little finger, and it's a dynamic that underpins every single one of their interactions. The hold that the Emperor has over someone who is meant to be the most terrifying figure in the galaxy is, itself, quite scary. It's an onscreen dynamic that I think is very different to what'd been seen before, and McDiarmid's inspired take on the big baddie is largely to thank for that!



Alex Damon (Star Wars Explained):

I'm a big fan of background characters, and I remember freaking out when I saw Wedge Antilles again at the Battle of Endor. I love that he gets to play a small role in all three films. He has his own subplot of not being able to stick around for the final trench run in *A New Hope*, and now he's the first pilot into the second Death Star. I love that he's at the Ewok party, hugging the main cast.



Grant Kempster (Starburst):

As a youngster, it was all about Wicket for me. Not just because he was a lovable ball of fluff, but because here was Warwick Davis, a kid just a couple of years older than me, that got picked to be in a *Star Wars* movie! It made the optimistic 10-year-old me believe that anything was possible.

Vanessa Berben (Starburst):

I was convinced the Ewoks were real and my parents were completely unfair for not finding one to live with us!

Kieron Moore (Starburst):

Max Rebo is the man, the dude, the legend. All the bad vibes going on across the galaxy, and this little blue guy just wants to hang with his pals and play his jizz music. My love for Max is heartfelt and unironic. What's that? He played at the palace of a known gangster and slave trafficker? Ah, let's not be too hasty in cancelling him - you see, the performance was a statement in itself, and the gangster in question was brought down shortly afterwards - Rebo is a true inspiration, a change-maker. Jizz makes the galaxy a better place.

Martin Keeler (The Zuveum):

The Max Rebo Band are the gift that keeps on giving - I would 100% want to hear an album from them!

RETURN OF THE JEDI's anniversary party will continue into next issue, so join us again soon for yet more discussion on this timeless classic!



TALES FROM JABBA'S PALACE

Join us for a unique peek behind the scenes of *RETURN OF THE JEDI*'s most iconic set-pieces as **STARBURST** interrogates two members of the Hutt's odious entourage.... or the men who played them, rather!

YAKKITY YAK

One of nine mime artists hired to bring the myriad monstrosities populating Jabba's Palace to life, **SEAN CRAWFORD** was chosen to play the character of underworld informant Saelt-Marae, better known to all as **YAK FACE**....

STARBURST: How did you come to get cast in the role?

Sean Crawford: It was January 9th, 1982. I went to a Blue Harvest Productions casting, nothing else was known. There must have been about thirty other hopefuls from all over the UK who also turned up to the small church hall in a shabby part of West London. We all had something in common and that was mime. I performed shows with Tim Dry - we called ourselves Tik and Tok - which heavily incorporated mime and music in a burlesque stage show. We were actually innovators of the Robotic dance movement that became a phenomenon in the '80s.

We're sure many of the readers will be familiar!

So co-producer Robert Watts and casting director Mary Selway monitored the casting, which was a couple hours workshop of abstract and animalistic movement under the instruction of Desmond Jones, my old mime tutor. Luck would have it, Robert was already aware of Tik and Tok, which worked in our favour and we got the call! Two weeks later, rehearsals and fittings were at Elstree Studios, a place miles from anywhere. On that first day, I waded through the layers of security and was shown into a waiting zone where lots of form-filling was going on. It was here I met up with the other successful mimes: Franki Anderson, Alisa Berk, Gerald Home, Andy Cunningham, Graeme Hattrick, Paul Springer, Phil Herbert, and, of course, Tim. We were ushered through to a studio where Robert Watts and chief articulation engineer Stuart Ziff went through introductions and briefed us that we were to be creature characters in Jabba's throne room and sail barge. Shortly after, I was taken through to creature designer Phil Tippett's studio, which had benches covered in strange and wonderful creature heads. It was then Phil came over to me and said, "I've got just the one for you to try on!" He then introduced me to Yak Face. Phil and Stuart had made all the creatures in the States and flew them over, so there was no knowing which character would fit who!



"Stairs were a nightmare!"
- Sean Crawford

Did they give you any kind of background on Saelt-Marae before the shoot?

Saelt-Marae sounds like a fancy French hairdresser's name! But not really, no. Soon after entering Stage 8, David Tomblin, the first assistant director, simply briefed us that Jabba was a crime lord, and that we were his entourage of gangsters, thieves, smugglers, and undesirables.

Sael-- Sorry, Yak Face's costume looks quite cumbersome, was it complex to perform under?

So his head had a fibreglass frame which was covered in thick foam and latex covering. My head was in Yak's neck section and there was an inch-wide hole carefully disguised with painted gauze for me to breathe and see out of. After the first fitting, straps were added to anchor it to my chest and take the weight off my neck as it weighed about 12lbs. It soon became apparent my visibility was next to nothing, and the thick foam neck also blocked out sound. Fortunately, David Tomblin used a megaphone to give directions! I had to memorise the layout of the set before I put Yak's head on for filming and just go for it. Stairs were a nightmare, too! With so many other creatures and extras on set, it certainly proved interesting at times.

How long did it take to shoot his scenes?

It was two weeks at Jabba's throne room on Stage 8 and a week on Stage 3, which was the interior of Jabba's barge.

What are your abiding memories of those weeks?

I don't think I will forget how life-like and real the sets and creatures were... if you can say that sitting in a darkened smoke-filled palace with a great big green oversized slug in front of you while gesturing to the three-eyed creature standing beside you!

Did you get to see any of the other sets other than your own?

Yes, I was lucky to have looked in on many other stages at Elstree Studios during my time there; the sheer scale of the Ewok village amongst the tall trees was quite breathtaking.

Richard Marquand often doesn't get enough credit for his contribution to Star Wars, how did you find him as a director?

He was a quietly spoken man who worked so much out in his head - like a maths genius - before explaining to his production team what he wanted and then using David Tomblin to convey to us what we were to do. He was very in tune with his production team, so



40
YEARS

everybody knew their job and there was a great deal of calmness. Which is really saying something considering that at times there were up to a hundred hot and sweaty cast and crew squeezed into such a confined space!

And how about George Lucas himself, was he ever present on your sets?

I remember George would occasionally appear discreetly as an observer and have some friendly banter with Richard, but he didn't seem to interfere with how Richard directed the film.

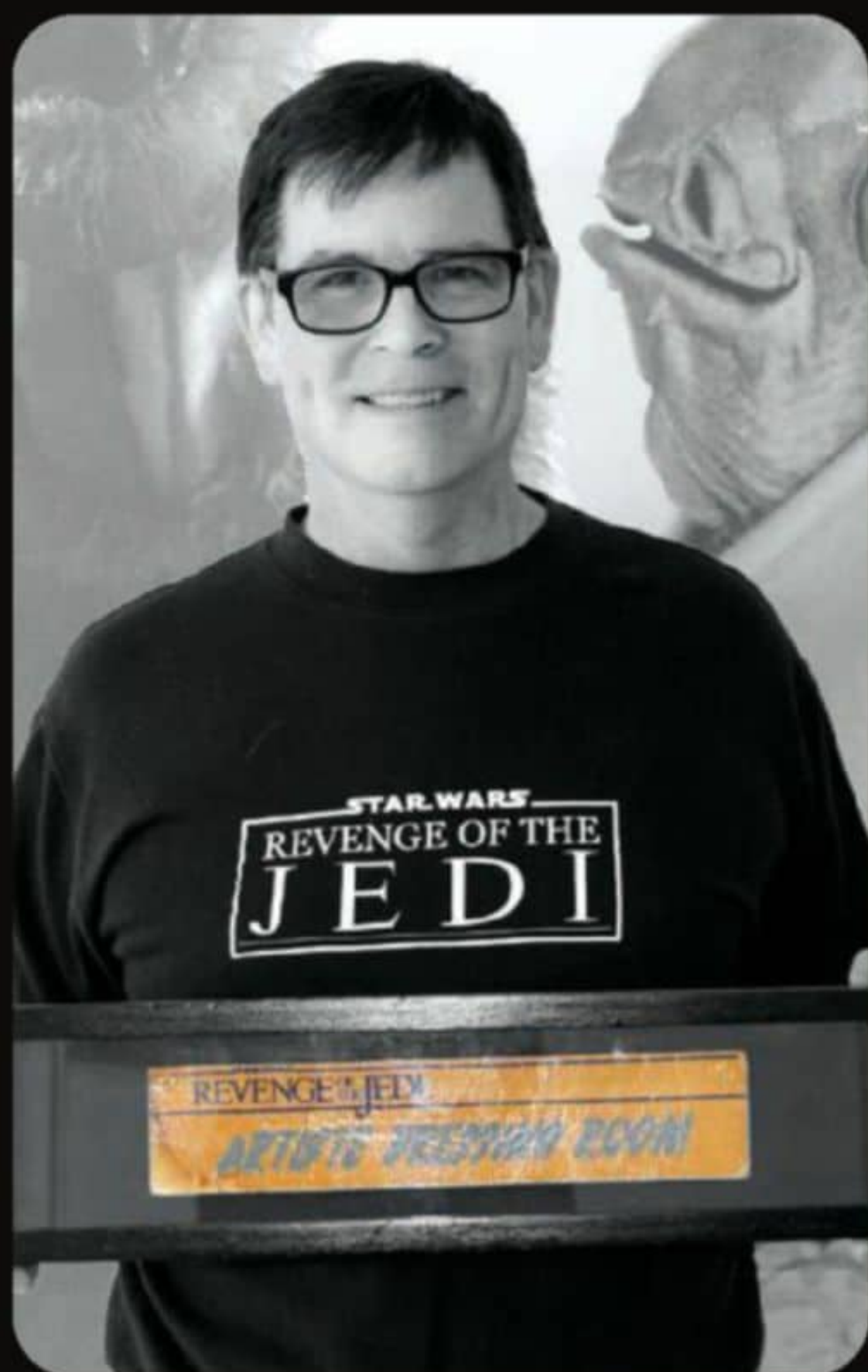
You must have been privileged to quietly observe quite a bit from underneath Yak's mask, were there any moments you got to witness that had you secretly chuckling?

I recall in Jabba's throne room when a stuntman did a scene with some seriously bright and hot lights attached to him, the type of light that you could land a jumbo jet with, and there was a long thick live cable trailing behind him which so very nearly sent a Pig Guard tumbling. It would have had a bowling ball effect and took everybody out in the vicinity! Off set, on the other hand, I would have a blast with Tim - who played Tooth Face - who I shared a dressing room with along with a childish sense of humour! We were forever pranking unsuspecting victims. I remember there was always masses of

talcum powder around to put on before getting kitted up, and once we balanced a bucket of the stuff on top of our door and in came Graeme Hattrick - who played The Mole - and poof! The room was a wipe-out. Thinking back, it was lucky the wardrobe department kept hold of all the outfits or continuity might have been a big problem!

As a testament to the enigmatic nature of the character, an original Yak Face action figure now commands prices of £1000 upwards, did Lucasfilm make sure you received one?

Chance would have been a fine thing. And at £1.59 a pop at the time, I would have bought a whole shelf if I had known! It wasn't until my first convention in 2003 that I heard about the iconic Yak Face figure. Only a few months later, I was feeling smug that I bagged a Yak for a tenner, but my joy was short-lived as I discovered it was the 1997 Power of the Force II reissue, so the hunt was still on for an original. In 2005, at the Star Wars Memorabilia show, I spotted the elusive character on a vendor's table, which I snapped up faster than a speeding ticket. I've remained a casual collector since, with a focus on Yak Face, of course. I've kindly been gifted some of the recent figures from Hasbro and Gentle Giant, and I've actually just completed my run of carded vintage Kenner figures!



Most impressive! You do regular convention appearances, what's the most enjoyable aspect about them?
I feel so lucky to be invited to conventions, they're such a win-win thing. I remember the first one I did in 2003; I sat next to Jeremy Bulloch [Boba Fett] and he showed me the ropes and told me who to contact in Lucasfilm to get myself some Yak Face photos. I couldn't believe Yak Face was a popular character and that fans would queue up for my signature! Over the years I've had many fun weekends with old members of the cast - sadly many are now no longer with us - and it's always good to meet new guests. Personally, I'm looking forward to meeting that badass Giancarlo Esposito at my next one! The best part, however, must be meeting the fans themselves, an eclectic group of fun-loving odd-bods, as well as catching up with my fellow 501st members who do so much good work for charity.

And as a collector, do you allow yourself a break to peruse the merch stalls?
Oh, I'm *always* trying to sniff out a good deal from a vendor's table! Over the years I've been fortunate to meet some of the world's biggest collectors who write books about the stuff, and also to meet the original Kenner production team, in addition to making contact with many talented artists who have inspired me to produce my own swag to give to my Herd - the members of my Yak Face Facebook Group!

You mentioned earlier that Jeremy Bulloch was a great guy, but of all the other Star Wars actors and crew you get to see at these cons, are there any



in particular that you enjoy catching up with most?

Tim Dry [Whiphid] has been my best buddy for over 40 years and reuniting at conventions is just the best jolly ever. There are few things better than travelling to different parts of the world experiencing the local food and having a beer or six with your mate and making new memories.

It's clear that you still have so much love for the franchise, do you keep up to date with the new Star Wars output?

Yes, I'm a fanboy like anybody else! I've actually been fortunate to be invited to a few red-carpet events in the past, but I'm now at an age where I enjoy a private viewing streamed at home with my sons. After the original trilogy, I'd say *The Force Awakens* is my favourite.

When's the next time that fans can see you?

Very soon! I'm a guest at *Star Wars Celebration* this year, so get your Yak Face T-shirts on and come say hello and pick up some swag I've made! Based on an original 1983 Dixie Cup, I've created my own illustrated coffee cup featuring the deleted Yak and Ree-Yees scene!

Oh nice!

And I'm throwing in a packet of Crawford's biscuits for the early birds, too!

Even better!

STAR WARS CELEBRATION 2023 is taking place at ExCeL London from April 7th-10th, with Sean appearing on the Friday and Saturday.

TOOTH BE TOLD

Fellow mime artist and the other half of robotic dance duo Tik and Tok alongside Sean Crawford, TIM DRY prowled the Palace as a duplicitous Whiphid by the name of J'Quille, aka TOOTH FACE...

Can you remember what it was like walking on those stages for the first time?

My first impression of Jabba's Palace was just how 'real' it all was. There were walls, floors, and ceilings - everything looked solid, and somehow decadent.

With so many characters, was it complicated working on such a busy set?

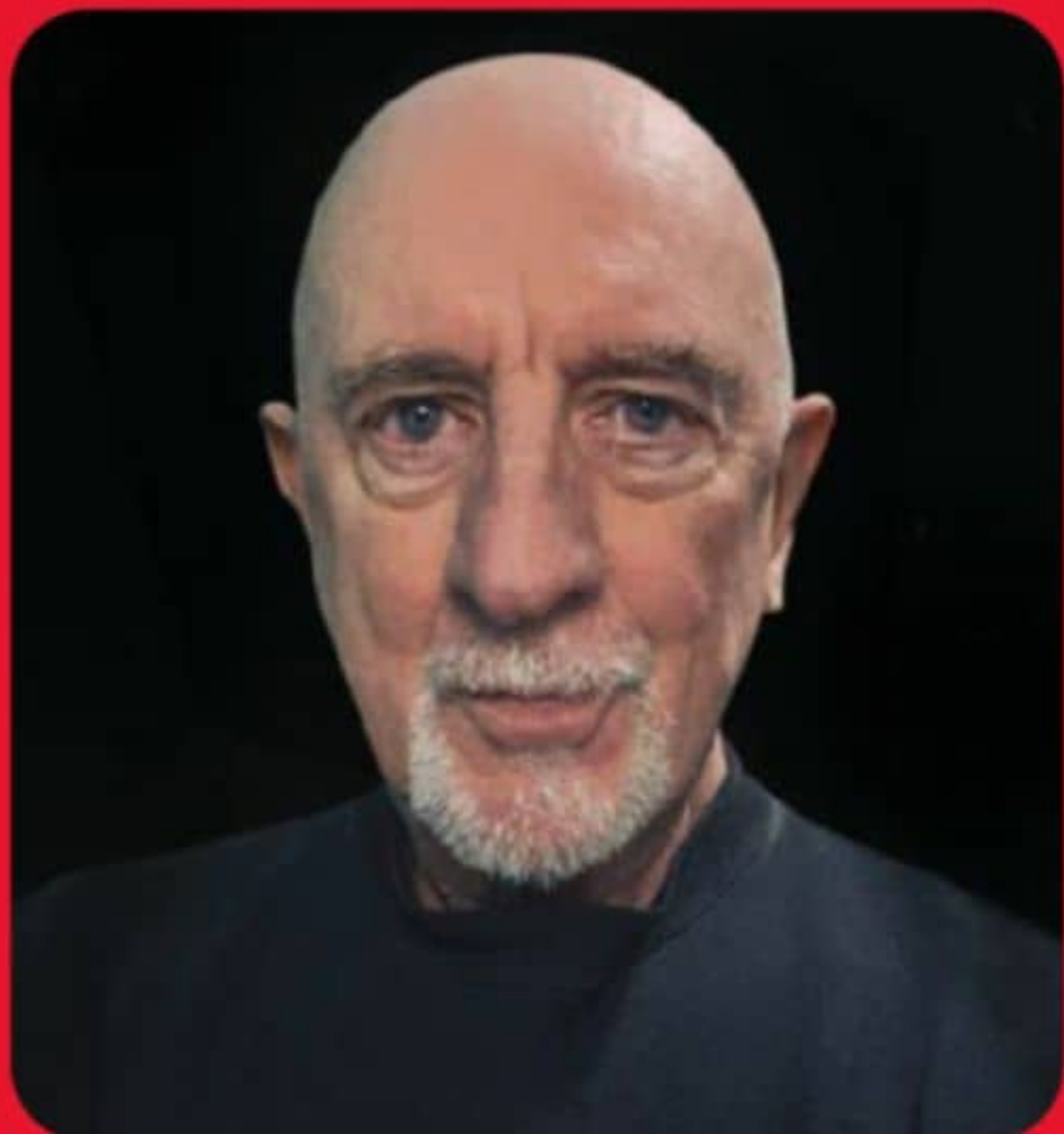
Once us mime artists were placed in position for our first scenes, that was it - we were stuck there until lunchtime! It was very crowded, what with all the mime artists, extras, crew, big cameras, and, of course, the principal actors. If you add in smoke machines and that many lights, it soon became very warm indeed. In fact, at least two or three of us in the really heavy costumes actually momentarily passed out.

Blimey! Did they do anything to try and prevent it happening again?

Some bright spark eventually came up with the idea of removing our creature heads and blowing cold air down inside our necks with a hair dryer! It was much needed. Each of us had at least one assistant who would rush in as soon as first AD David Tomblin yelled "CUT!" to relieve us of our cranial coverage.

Were there any other challenges you had to navigate?

Plenty. The set was built about six feet off the ground so that puppeteers could work underneath - I realised on Day One that I should *not* have coffee when offered it, and to definitely avoid baked beans at lunch time, otherwise you could suffer a methane overdose! Even though us mime artists were hired for our skills, which would enable us to bring alien creatures to life, the sets were so crowded we could hardly move at all. Which was a great shame. After all the Jabba's palace scenes were done, we moved



onto another set to film the interiors of his sail barge. That was even more crowded and cramped. It was difficult to move when David Tomblin bellowed "OK, PANIC ACTING!" as Leia strangles Jabba. Incidentally, the set was built on the back lot at Elstree studios that decades later became the Big Brother House!

Sean mentioned that Lucas would sometimes swing by...

Yes, George Lucas would appear on set most days. He did a fair amount of beard-tugging as he'd discuss scenes with Richard Marquand. David Tomblin pretty much directed us mime artists and the extras, though.

And what about the principal cast, did you have many interactions with them?

My girlfriend at the time pleaded with me to get Harrison Ford's autograph! One day, during a lunch break and having all of the top half of my Tooth Face costume removed, I ventured on to the empty set and found Harrison sitting in a canvas chair perusing his script. I tentatively approached him and the look on his face as he turned round at the sound of my voice was priceless! He was confronted by a tall young man with long dyed black hair wearing a grubby white T shirt and an enormous pair of very furry trousers. He graciously signed a piece of paper that I offered him and went back to reading the script. When I got back to my dressing room, I discovered to my horror that somehow I'd managed to lose the precious bit of paper with his signature on it! Well, there was no way I was going to trudge all the way back and bother him again. I fibbed to my girlfriend and said that Harrison was really busy and couldn't be approached. She sadly understood.

Tim Dry will be also appearing at STAR WARS CELEBRATION on April 7th and 8th. The following weekend, he'll be at the XOGOLD CHARITY EVENT in Utrecht, Holland, and in the first week of May at INTERGALACTICON in Rochester, New York.



"Two or three of us in the really heavy costumes actually passed out!"

- Tim Dry



REVENGE OF RETURN OF THE JEDI

by Kris Heys

In the four long decades since ROTJ was released, so much of the unique iconography the film introduced us to has gone on to provide fertile ground for the artists that continue to flesh out that galaxy far, far away. Join us as we highlight some of our favourite examples of how the (then) final STAR WARS movie informed forty MORE years of storytelling....

KNOCK KNOCK....

Manufactured by Serv-O-Droid, Inc., the typically belligerent TT-8L/Y7 gatekeeper droid is widely used across the galaxy by security conscious types who need all their guests thoroughly screened first. Protecting their dodgy dealings from prying eyes, 'The Client' utilised a "tattletale droid" (as they're sometimes known) to keep his baby-hunting dealings on Nevarro private [see Episode 1.1 of *The Mandalorian*], and General Grievous had multiple units installed inside his secret fortress to watch over its labyrinthine corridors [Episode 2.10 of *The Clone Wars*, 'Lair of Grievous']. Video doorbells may be all the rage these days, but only a TT-8L/Y7 will truly be able to protect your Amazon packages from those pesky porch pirates!



WHEN THE SITH HITS THE FAN

No matter how thorough they may be, a TT-8L/Y7 still isn't keeping out a Dark Lord of the Sith, as evidenced by the time Darth Vader himself paid an impromptu visit to Jabba's Palace [Marvel Comics' *Darth Vader* #1] in the aftermath of the first Death Star's destruction. Negotiations with the vile gangster soon turned nasty (surprise, surprise), resulting in Jabba eventually finding himself on the business end of a Force choke. As a means of apology for his insolence, the Hutt gifted Vader the service of two of his best bounty hunters – the Wookiee mercenary Black Krrsantan and Boba Fett – to assist in the search for a certain Rebel pilot who'd recently piqued the Sith's interest....





ME CASA SU CASA

Before Jabba settled on the Palace as his Tatooine base, the structure originally served as a monastery and belonged to the B'omarr Order, a sect of monks who, in their quest for enlightenment, decided to rid themselves of their bothersome bodies and plop their brains into jars attached to giant spider-droids! In *Return of the Jedi*, C-3PO is immediately creeped out by the sight of one upon entering the Palace, but it's for this precise reason Jabba is happy cohabiting with them – he finds them amusingly gruesome! It hasn't been addressed yet whether Boba Fett, the Palace's current owner following a brutal takeover [Episode 1 of *The Book of Boba Fett*, 'Stranger in a Strange Land'], shares the Hutt's affinity for the monks, or whether he promptly called pest control, but we've at least seen one of these weirdos scuttling about their business in the five years since Jabba's passing [Episode 3 of *The Book of Boba Fett*, 'The Streets of Mos Espa'].

HOGGING THE LIMELIGHT

Gamorreans have gotten plenty of screentime since their first introduction, most notably in *The Book of Boba Fett*, which saw Tatooine's new crime lord sparing two of the Palace's former guards from execution in exchange for their loyalty. Something of a mystery, however, is why Fett was happy with them walking around shirtless, only their furry battle-nappies covering their modesty. At least get those pigs in blankets!



FORTUNA AND GLORY

Jabba's majordomo Bib Fortuna was one of the few survivors of the sail barge's destruction at the Great Pit of Carkoon, and swiftly took advantage of his boss' death by taking his throne for himself. By the time we caught up with him again [in the post-credits sequence of Episode 2.8 of *The Mandalorian*, 'The Rescue'], five years had passed, and it appeared Fortuna had also helped himself to a few too many Klatooine paddy frogs, his former master's favourite snack. Unsurprisingly, he wasn't in much of a position to defend his throne from the returning Fett, who casually executed Fortuna and claimed the position of Tatooine crime lord as his own.

SOME LIKE IT HUTT

For much of his long life (he was roughly 600 years old when he carked it), Jabba the Hutt - or Jabba Desilijic Tiure to give him his full name - was a high-ranking member of the powerful Hutt Council alongside the other heads of the five clans it consisted of: Gorga, Arok, Oruba, and Marlo [Episode 3.8 of *The Clone Wars*, 'Evil Plans']. While the council would largely conduct business from the more slug-friendly swamp world of Nal Hutta, Jabba preferred to oversee his business affairs personally, sweating it out under the twin suns of Tatooine. Although he'd survived his own previous run-ins with Vader, his fellow council members weren't so lucky, eventually being massacred by the Dark Lord at the behest of an Emperor Palpatine weary of their interference, leaving Jabba the sole member [War of the Bounty Hunters #5].



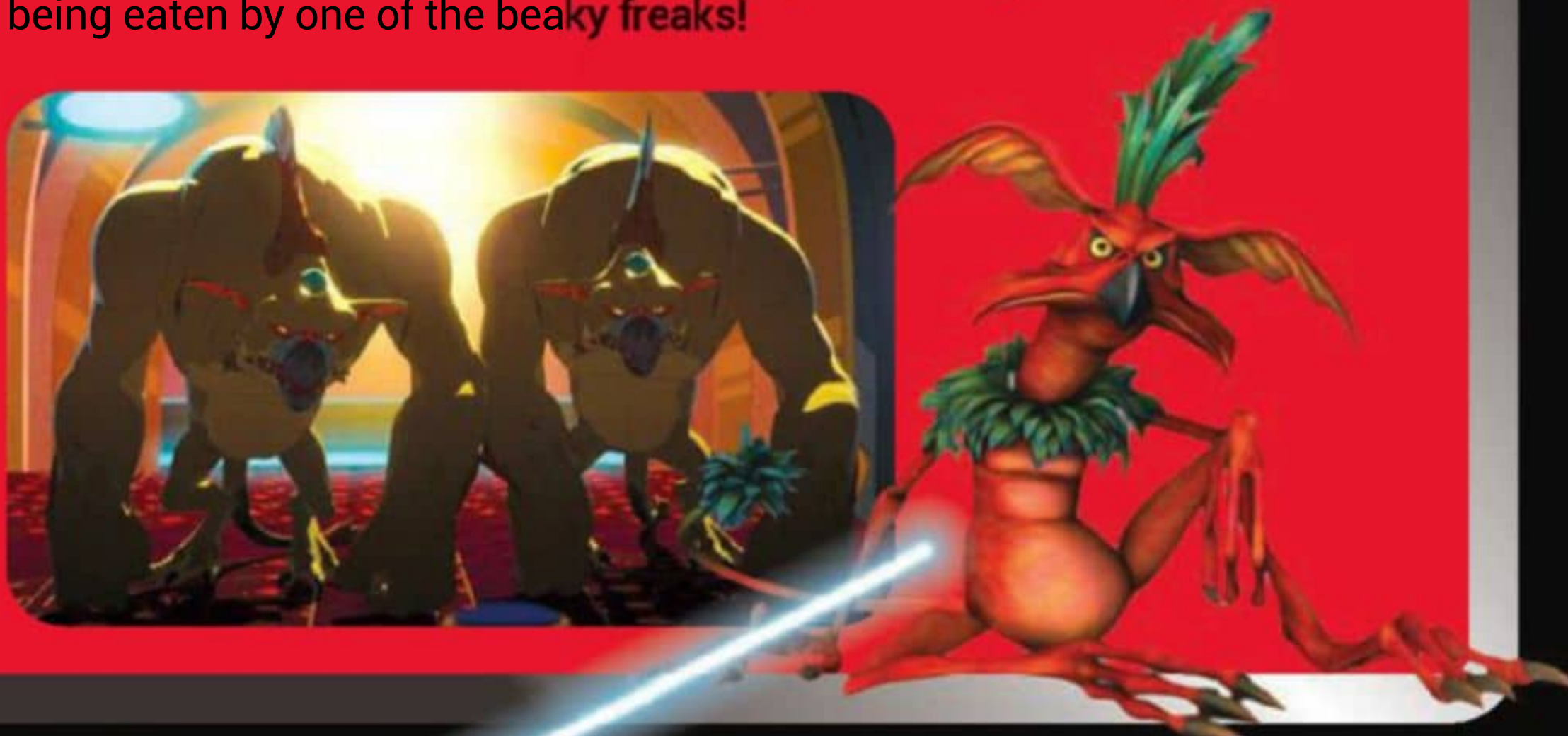


FOREVER YOUNGLING

Jabba's young son Rotta the Hutt played a pivotal part in the raging Clone Wars when he was kidnapped by Count Dooku's Sith apprentice Asajj Ventress as part of a larger plan to cause a rift between the Republic and the powerful Hutt cartel [see *The Clone Wars* animated feature]. Unfortunately for the mastermind behind the kidnap, Jabba's conniving uncle Ziro the Hutt, the Jedi Council had tasked Anakin Skywalker and his newly assigned Padawan, the then 14-year-old Ahsoka Tano, to find and return the missing Huttlet, which they did with typical aplomb. Curiously, however, Rotta's subsequent whereabouts remain a mystery, but we can't help thinking that Ahsoka's insistence on nicknaming him 'Stinky' had long-lasting effects on his confidence. Maybe he's still in therapy?

OH CRUMBS!

Salacious B. Crumb (we still don't know what the 'B' stands for) was employed by Jabba as the Palace's jester, the proviso being that he made the Hutt laugh once a day, otherwise he'd be killed. While we've never seen him do anything remotely amusing save for taking pleasure in the misery of others, he must have been doing something right as, prior to croaking aboard the *Khetanna*, he'd managed to live in the palace rent free for years! His species - Kowakian Monkey-Lizards - appear regularly in *Star Wars* mythology, with two of the most noteworthy being Piff Mukmuk and his brother Pikk, the pets of infamous space-pirate Hondo Ohnaka [Episode 1.11 of *The Clone Wars*, 'Dooku Captured']. Their naturally wicked nature means you're best approaching with caution if you ever cross paths with one - and they're in abundance at Black Spire Outpost should you ever visit - but pray you *never* encounter a Kowakian Ape-Lizard, the creature's towering, intimidatingly buff relative. Poe Dameron, BB-8, and Kaz Xiono learnt of the dangers these beasts pose the hard way while investigating a distress signal [Episode 1.11 of *Star Wars Resistance*, 'Signal from Sector Six'], witnessing several poor pirates being eaten by one of the beaky freaks!



THE ZON

Her home planet of Ryloth has a long history of Twi'lek oppression, so it was a particularly cruel fate that Oola suffered as a result of her momentary rebellion against her captor. Continuing that same spirit of defiance through further canon were her fellow Twi'leks Hera Syndulla, the brave Rebel leader and pilot [*Star Wars Rebels*], and Jedi Master Aayla Secura [*Attack of the Clones*].



Even the entertainers in Jabba's Palace are duplicitous monsters! The lead singer of the Max Rebo Band looks like butter wouldn't melt in her snout, but Sy Snootles actually pulled double duty as a bounty hunter and had a long history with Jabba, working as a spy for the Hutt Council. The Pa'lowick was also responsible for the murder of Ziro the Hutt after his betrayal was uncovered [Episode 3.9 of *The Clone Wars*, 'Hunt for Ziro'], an act motivated largely by the fact he dumped Sy and broke her heart. Inexplicably, it turns out that when not speaking in Huttese, Miss Snooty talks with a Southern belle accent. *Well, I declare!*





FAVOURITE DECORATION

Chronicled in the epic 34-issue *War of the Bounty Hunters* comic book crossover event, what should have been a routine delivery of Solo's frozen body from Cloud City to Tatooine turned into a nightmare for Boba Fett when the carbonite slab started to malfunction en route. A stop off on the moon of Nar Shaddaa to acquire a fix saw Solo stolen right from under Fett's nose by the scoundrel's ex-lover Qi'ra [*Solo: A Star Wars Story*], now head of the mighty criminal organisation Crimson Dawn, and put up for auction. With such a valuable prize up for grabs, interested parties across the galaxy gathered to make their bid - including representatives of the Hutt Council, Vader, rival criminal organisation Black Sun, and undercover Rebels aplenty - and as one would expect, much death and destruction resulted as these powerful organisations bumped heads. All part of Qi'ra's master plan, which - as an announcement to the galaxy that Crimson Dawn had returned and would be a thorn in the side to all - worked a treat. Aside from the part about her failing to ultimately return Solo to Leia once the dust settled. Oops. Instead, Fett would eventually regain possession of Solo amidst the epic chaos and *finally* deliver him to Jabba, who promptly popped him on the Palace wall for all to admire.

MY KIND OF SCUM

An accomplished bounty hunter, Boushh met his match with Leia who, alongside R2-D2 and Maz Kanata, managed to quell his ambush and steal his distinctive armour [Episode 2.6 of *Forces of Destiny*, 'Bounty Hunted'].



PATEESA THE ACTION

Despite their ferocious appearance, the rancor is largely a peaceful species, all too often utilised by nefarious types like Jabba as instruments of intimidation. It wasn't the first one of its kind that Jabba had owned, either, as Clone Force 99 once took on a mission to liberate a stolen female rancor by the name of Muchi from kidnappers and return it to Bib Fortuna [Episode 1.5 of *The Bad Batch*, 'Rampage']. While we're currently unaware of Muchi's fate, the male that met its end after unluckily being fed Luke Skywalker for lunch was called Pateesa. Which, translated from Huttese, actually means 'friend'. "Awww."

A NEW DEFINITION OF PAIN AND SUFFERING

Fett's armour kept him safe long enough to survive his short time in the belly of the beastly sarlacc, but few are lucky enough to be rocking a suit of beskar - so whatever you do, watch your step when traversing planets such as Tatooine. Adults can grow to a truly terrifying size, with only krayt dragons posing a threat, but thanks to Han Solo and Chewbacca, visitors to the Den of Antiquities in Galaxy's Edge can observe the rare baby sarlacc they bravely imported for the store's owner, Dok-Ondar [see *Marvel's Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge* #1]. Just don't get too close to the glass!

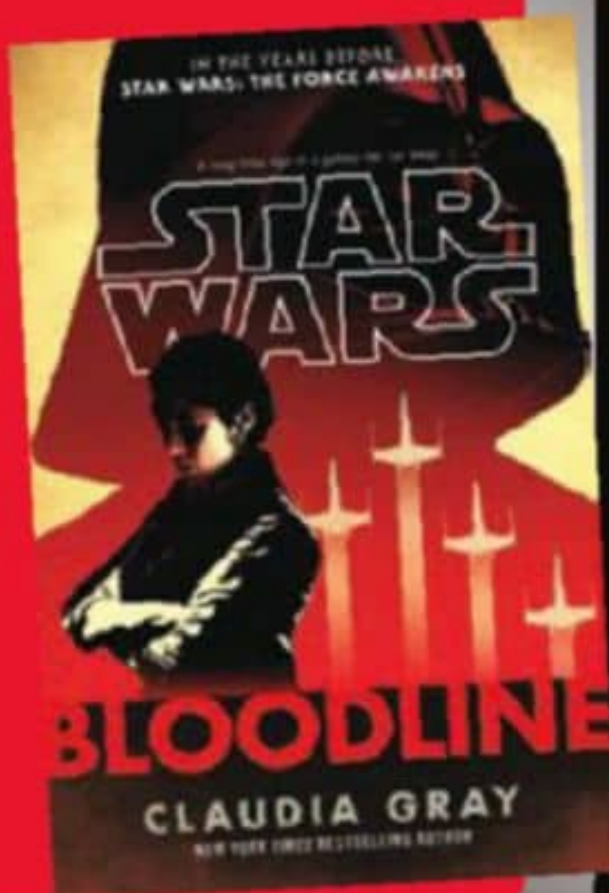
HE'S A KEEPER

Broken by the death of Pateesa, Jabba's rancor keeper Malakili chose to leave the Palace and seek his fate - whatever that may have been - amongst the danger-filled desert plains of Tatooine. Despite coming close to death himself, the Corellian native eventually crossed paths with Cobb Vanth, who, learning of his history caring for all manner of creature, gave him the job of training Freetown's newly acquired Huttlet, Borgo [see the *Star Wars: Aftermath* trilogy]. The Palace would finally be gifted a new rancor and keeper years later, with Jabba's cousins - 'the Twins' - offering them to Lord Boba Fett as way of apology for trying to kill him [Episode 3 of *The Book of Boba Fett*, 'The Streets of Mos Espa']. This new keeper (played by the brilliant Danny Trejo, yet still unidentified in canon), provided us with more insight into the often-misunderstood creature, revealing that the rancor imprints upon those it sees first, instantly creating a bond. Once more, "awww".



FULL THROTTLE

Following her assassination of Jabba the Hutt, Leia would go on to be known the galaxy over by the fabled moniker of The Huttlayer [see *Star Wars: Bloodline*]. Maz Kanata even named a drink after her, so if you ever find yourself boozing amongst the pirate clientele at Takodana Castle, make a toast to the late great general by ordering yourself a Huttlayer Splash [Star Wars Battlefront II].



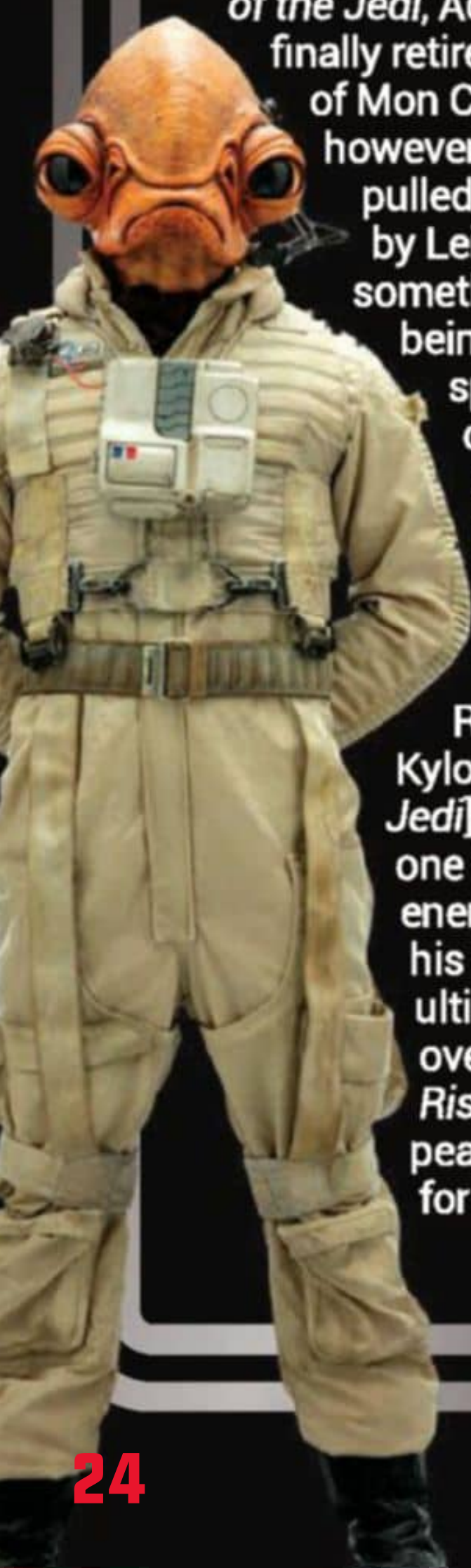
RED IN THE FACE

Though they're the revered Royal Guard of the Emperor himself, these proto-Praetorians had embarrassingly been bested several times just a short while before we met them in *Jedi* - once at the hands of Lady Qi'ra's Crimson Dawn [poisoned; see Marvel's *Crimson Reign* #2], and not too long after that by Padme's former handmaiden Sabé [arses kicked; see *Darth Vader* #28].



IT'S A WRAP

After serving on the battlefield during the Clone Wars and continuing to fight the last remnant of the Empire post-*Return of the Jedi*, Admiral Ackbar would finally retire on his home planet of Mon Cala. It was short-lived, however, as he was eventually pulled back into active service by Leia Organa when she smelt something fishy. (This isn't us being disparaging to Ackbar's species, Leia was literally one of the few who were suspect of the growing threat that was The First Order!) Sadly for Gial Ackbar, he eventually perished during the Resistance's escape from Kylo Ren's fleet [*The Last Jedi*], but not before delivering one final, crucial blow to the enemy. He is survived by his son Aftab Ackbar, who ultimately aided in the victory over The Final Order [*The Rise of Skywalker*], restoring peace to the galaxy once and for all. (Or for now, at least.)



A MOTHMA TO A FLAME

From her days as a high-ranking politician growing increasingly concerned with Palpatine's true intentions within the senate [*Andor*], to the founding and eventual leadership of the Rebel Alliance as we know it, Mon Mothma had been fighting the good fight for longer than all of our favourite heroes by the time we were introduced to her in *ROTJ*. Indeed, her final days in the senate culminated in her condemning Palpatine directly (and not just for that weird gnarly face of his), forcing her to finally flee Coruscant - courtesy of a lift by the crew of the *Ghost* [Episode 3.18 of *Star Wars Rebels*, 'Secret Cargo'] - and officially go public with the unification of the steadily growing Rebel cells across the galaxy. Within two years, her successful but casualty-heavy mission to steal the blueprints to the Empire's new superweapon [*Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*] helped deal a seismic blow to Palpatine's regime.



COMFORTABLY NUNB

When Leia Organa eventually created the Resistance to protect the New Republic against a threat few would believe existed, Nien Nunb - a long-time ally [see Marvel's *Princess Leia* miniseries and *Star Wars: Moving Target*] - was one of the very first to sign up to her cause. Though the former Sullustan smuggler proved a valuable asset during their fight against The First Order, he would unfortunately perish during the battle of Exegol [*The Rise of Skywalker*]. R.I.P., Nien.



CANNIBAL FUR-OX

Caravan of Courage, *Battle for Endor*, and the *Ewoks* animated series (all currently deemed 'Legends' and probably for the best) capitalised on the furry freedom fighters' adorable appeal, but only the canonical *Battlefront II* video game mode 'Night on Endor' has fully explored their true savagery. The game sees Stormtroopers trying to live through a single night on the forest moon as they are relentlessly attacked by the brutal beasts, painting the Ewoks as the stuff of nightmares! It shouldn't really come as much of a surprise - if C-3PO hadn't convinced the diminutive monsters that he was a golden god, Luke, Han, and Chewie would have been supper that one evening on Endor; and in the *Forces of Destiny* episode 'An Imperial Feast', they're at it again only days later, leaving Leia no choice other than to intervene before several of them cook a pair of Stormtroopers on a spit. Terrifying!



BEST LAID PLANS....

The Emperor may have not seen Vader's sudden switch in allegiance coming, but he certainly thought about his potential defeat a lot. And we mean, 'a lot'. Behold: The Contingency. Not only had Palpatine left clear instructions to his Empire to retreat to the Outer Rim in the event of his death (an order delivered by Messenger Droids hauntingly bearing his own face), but Operation: Cinder would also begin immediately. This ghastly manoeuvre would see several planets - including his native planet of Naboo - cooked with a ready-and-waiting superweapon [*Battlefront II*]; these targets encompassing both rebel-aligned worlds and those occupied by his own ranks. By allowing its leader to perish, then the Empire *itself* must be punished. Of course, this was far from the end of the Emperor's plans - cloning research and experimentation had already been taking place for years in an attempt to conquer death, the results of which led to the horrifying proxy-Palpatine that would eventually emerge on Exegol, and the creation of Snoke [check out those pickled versions in *The Rise of Skywalker*]. The planet also housed the secret Sith armada, The Final Order, a fearsome fleet that had taken decades to prepare under his supervision. Has the galaxy seen the last of Palpatine? Rest assured, his myriad machinations are most certainly in operation somewhere....

LOVE IN THE TIME OF WAR

Among those celebrating the destruction of the Death Star II at Bright Tree Village were the parents of the then two-year-old Poe Dameron, Rebel pilot Shara Bey and Rebel sergeant Kes Dameron (that's him tossing Han Solo a charge as they take down the Deflector Shield Generator - albeit *just* off-screen) - who were finally reunited that night after a long absence [*Shattered Empire* #1]. Romance was, of course, also blossoming for Han and Leia, who would soon make things official in a wedding ceremony on Endor, officiated by Luke himself. The newlyweds allowed themselves a short break from war to honeymoon aboard the Galactic Star Cruiser the *Halcyon* [*The Princess and the Scoundrel*], and a few short years later, they welcomed their son Ben Solo into the galaxy. Inducted by Luke as a student in his burgeoning Jedi Academy, Ben was sadly already being seduced in the ways of the dark side by Palpatine's mysterious puppet Snoke, and soon enough--



On second thought, let's take inspiration from *Return of the Jedi* and just bring this piece to a close before things get super depressing. Roll credits!

Revisit RETURN OF THE JEDI in glorious 4K on Disney+. For even more continuation of the canon, check out Marvel Comics' upcoming ROTJ issues, beginning with the JABBA'S PALACE special on March 29th.

NO ONE IS EVER REALLY GONE

In our 45 years in print, STARBURST has had the pleasure of speaking with many of the remarkably talented cast and crew whose contributions to STAR WARS have paved the way for it to become one of the most important mythologies in all of storytelling. In this special feature, we pay tribute by scouring our interview archives to bring you insights into the making of RETURN OF THE JEDI from the people who were actually there, but are sadly no longer with us now. Through these films that we will forever hold so dear, they live on. No one is ever really gone....

CARRIE FISHER

Interviewed in 1983 and first published in STARBURST Issue 61, just a few short months after RETURN OF THE JEDI had finally landed in UK cinemas, the iconic actress was on delightfully candid form. Revisiting this vintage conversation, it cemented even further how much STAR WARS - and in particular the character of Leia herself - meant to Carrie Fisher on a profound level. She cared for the Princess of Alderaan every bit as deeply as we fans all did and forever will.

THE EVOLUTION OF LEIA ORGANA

"They took a lot of the bite out of her bitchiness [in *Return of the Jedi*]. You can look at that in a positive way - it's nice that she's not barking at everyone, even though she's been introduced as a character who's a soldier, who really has no friends, but then meets up with people of her own age. In

The Empire Strikes Back, it was nice because she is a little more confused. She's fighting with Han because she's not used to interacting on a human level with people. I like those sorts of relationships. In *Star Wars*, she's just angry, which I think is a function of youth. She was probably brought up in an environment where she's constantly under attack, so she just became this defensive, sardonic, tough little girl. Then, in the second film, she's still tough, but softens up and somehow the toughness is channelled towards Han, so that when he goes away it's her first willingness to show emotion for somebody else. So to form attachments under these conditions is really an exercise. She's just a 'stepped' person. She ages, she matures, and she has relationships, which she didn't have in the first film, so she becomes attached to Han and just becomes more female, I think. I like that because she's still strong and capable, yet feminine. It seems as though, when men write women characters and they're supposed to be strong, they have to be mean or angry, and they're strong under attack. In *Empire*, she is the leader of the Rebellion, but she doesn't seem to have as much ego as in the first film. In some ways, she's matured enough to be able to think maybe somebody else has an idea. In the first film it's, "I'll do it!", out of panic."

SOMEONE WHO LOVES YOU

"Han and Leia are two people who are absolutely opposite, like Bogart and Hepburn in *The African Queen*. Leia is from a very high class and Han is a smuggler, a rogue. The best thing about *Empire* was

that Irvin Kershner, Harrison and I would sit around and write the whole thing out. That scene [aboard the Falcon] was great, I really love it. We wrote a lot of the dialogue. That's the first time anyone called me "Leia", really. But coming from Han Solo, it sounds absurd at that point, as we'd been fighting and he'd been calling me "Your Holiness". So we'd bring a lot of our own humour into that. It was easier for me to write lines for Harrison; then his dialogue would reflect what my character was like, although she was coming apart at that point. In *Jedi*, she changed to become a more accessible person."

FROM PRINCESS TO BOUNTY HUNTER

"When I think of myself as Leia, I don't know if her character is that way largely because of my voice or style. It's very kind of male instead of being submissive and supportive. I had a lot of trouble as the bounty hunter [Boushh] in *Jedi*. To me, it just looks like me, but in a whole other way. The first time I did it, I had to walk the whole of the way across the stage and I looked like a girl. George [Lucas] told me to stand like John Wayne. If you're tall and you stand like that, it's fine. But if you're my size, it looks like you're waiting to be asked to dance. But then, John Wayne walked like a woman. He swayed his hips - it was called a 'swagger'. Richard Gere walks like a stud and that's different. He walks like "you want what I've got!", but *that* I couldn't do real well. Try as you might, you can't hide the fact that I'm five foot one and very thin. Compared to everyone else, I look tiny. Then they put me against Chewie! I don't know why they didn't cheat or put me on an apple box or something. I do look like a child. The whole crew was sick with the flu, and they had

“I’d got bronchitis in ten minutes....”

- Carrie Fisher

this incense burning on the stage. I had no holes in the mask to breathe through, so by the end of the master take, I’d lost my breath and they had to take me off the stage. They let you do four takes when they can see you’re gradually deteriorating to nothing - and you don’t want to complain. I was really ill. I’d got bronchitis in about ten minutes - you can do it if you work hard enough! I came in and worked the next day, but they called in the doctor, the same doctor we’ve had for every film. *“Hello again. Well, what’s wrong this time? Ah, you’ve got a bit of congestion. I’d send you home if you weren’t a Star War”* - it had become a noun - *“but as you’re a Star War, I’ll just put you on double doses of Caflax.”* I was just whacked! Those things make me real down.”

A LEADER IN CHAINS

“I came in and looked at the script pages and George was off ill. I said, *“Excuse me, but you guys take my clothes off then chain me up? After two films where I’m not afraid of Vader or Tarkin, why should I be afraid of a slug?”* [Shooting] the scene where I’m tied to Jabba, Han comes in and says, *“Where’s Leia?”* I say, *“I’m here!”* and he asked how I am. I answer, *“I’ve been better!”* I think we wrote that, Richard Marquand, Dave Tomblin, and I. Then as the others are led off, leaving me sitting there, Leia doesn’t say, *“Well, good luck in the digestion process!”* - I said it in rehearsal. At that point, I was amazed that Leia would just sit there, in those skimpy clothes, saying practically nothing. The only way they could justify that, I told them, was if Jabba pulled my chains real tight so I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t see my character not talking.”

...TO BE CONTINUED?

“George is real tired. His wife’s just had another baby. I just saw him, he’s lost 15lbs, he’s executive producing *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, the prequel to *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and he doesn’t have time for life. He oversees everything, every single move. He oversees all the miniatures, the editing, the mixing, the looping, everything - though I don’t think he’d look good in a slave girl outfit. And his wife is also an editor, so they hardly ever see each other. If he does another one, I don’t know if he’d do it for some time and then, I think, he’d do 1, 2, and 3, which would be young Kenobi and young Vader in a pub in space.”

RICHARD MARQUAND

Our original talk with the director of RETURN OF THE JEDI again took place in 1983 (in STARBURST Issue 58), but this time, months 'prior' to the film being seen anywhere in the world. In fact, the movie went by a very different name at that moment in time, with trailers and other promotional materials still boasting the now legendary title of....

...REVENGE OF THE JEDI?

"It is going to change. But the longer we can delay announcing that, the happier we're going to be. We had always wanted to call it *Return of the Jedi*. Because philosophically, it's correct. *Revenge of the Jedi* has a ring about it that I think isn't right for this movie. It's negative. And Jedi don't seek revenge. A Jedi Knight can't understand that as a concept of behaviour. But we thought we'd use it as a working title. It's an interesting talking point when we do change it. It'll be interesting for people to discuss the value of *Revenge* against the value of *Return*. And we've had a lot of interest from fans saying, "Why are you calling it *Revenge* in the first place? You shouldn't!" We've been dealing with that for some time."

THE CHOSEN ONE

"When I was first working on *Eye of the Needle*, I heard George Lucas was looking for a director, a new director for his next episode, and would I be interested in putting my name up. And I said, "There's no way in the world

I'm going to be considered by George Lucas. Who the hell am I?" There are all these major directors looking for work. He could get anybody he wanted. They'd give their eye teeth for a chance to direct it. But agents, and people like that, said, "What have you got to lose?" So I thought, let's go for it! There were some preliminary meetings with Howard Kazanjian, who is the producer of the film, and we got on well. By then, I was doing a rough cut of *Eye*. I was preparing a fine cut when George was over here with Steven Spielberg, and John Williams was doing the music for *Raiders*. I was at Twickenham and they were at Elstree for three days and George asked to see what I had done. I don't like to show a fine cut to anybody much, but I knew George was a moviemaker. This was the first time we had met. He screened the fine cut at Elstree and sat through the whole thing, which was apparently a terrifically good sign. Then he got in a car and came down to see me at Twickenham. We really liked each other very much and just talked film, which you don't

get a chance to do with someone in his position. This was in January and he said that I wouldn't hear anything for a while. There were other directors on the list. He had to see everybody's work. But he wanted to see everything I had done, and I said, "Please, not everything!" and he said, "Yeah, everything!" So, with my censorship, he began to look at my stuff. Documentaries I had shot at the BBC, little dramas I had done going way back. And he was doing that with other directors, both British and American. He was looking for someone who could work well, work fast, with an established cast, who was a fan of the series, and who could think quickly because we had to keep the budget in check. But he wanted someone who could interpret him. I had to know what the whole thing meant to him so I could do my job. I like that interpretive role. I come from a theatre tradition. So it was like a theatre director working with a piece of Bernard Shaw or whatever. An *auteur* would say, "I'm going to take your movie and do this" - throw it against the wall, change it all around. One thing George wanted was a director who wasn't going to be rowing with him all the time. You can't make movies on that basis. It isn't possible. So it took a long time. Finally, there were only two of us left. It was about April or May of 1981. Then I got a phone call to hear I'd been chosen."

RETURN OF THE SCREENWRITER

"There was a period before I got the job when I couldn't see George because he was actually writing the first draft of *Revenge of the Jedi*. Then he came back from the hotel where he had locked himself away. I wasn't hired, but I had said that I thought Lawrence Kasdan would be a terrific guy to bring





“There’s now a way
into the world ‘m
ing the
can id red
George Lucas.
Who the hell am I?”
-Richard Marquand

in to do the final write. He has a terrific sense of character and pace. He’s got the kind of wry humour that I have, and a good attitude to physicality. He’s gutsy. George said if we could get him, that’d be great. Larry was in the middle of *Body Heat*, but George was able to persuade him. I was glad because what happened, finally, once George said, okay, you’re the director, the three of us sat in a locked room for two, three weeks, and really went through exactly what this film was that we wanted to make. I had a whole plan of the way I wanted to present each character, each new character, to make it slightly different from the other ones, because *Empire* ends in a kind of explosion - everyone’s going off in different directions. I thought it’d be nice if we opened this one with a tremendous sense of mystery. A “*where is everybody*” sort of feeling. We know that Vader and the Emperor are really on the Rebels’ tails and *Empire* really ended on a dark note. I thought it would be nice to pick that up, to know that the Imperial forces have finally done it. All the heroes are scattered on the four corners of the galaxy and then I could bring in each one in a surprising way. And George liked that idea too. Larry picked it up and turned it into something really terrific. Then I was talking about killing off one of the main characters. George wouldn’t have that. I wanted to kill someone off - give it a kick - somewhere in the middle. No, no. He wouldn’t do that.”

FIRST STEPS INTO A LARGER WORLD

“I was coming to it as the new boy. The only new boy on the block, really. But it was wonderful. The attitude all along was, “*You’re the director!*” I just had to get chapter and verse right. I had to understand the rules of *Star Wars*. The givens, which are very rigid. Once we had a screenplay we could work from, I was able to get going on the storyboards for some of the bigger action sequences, which I have

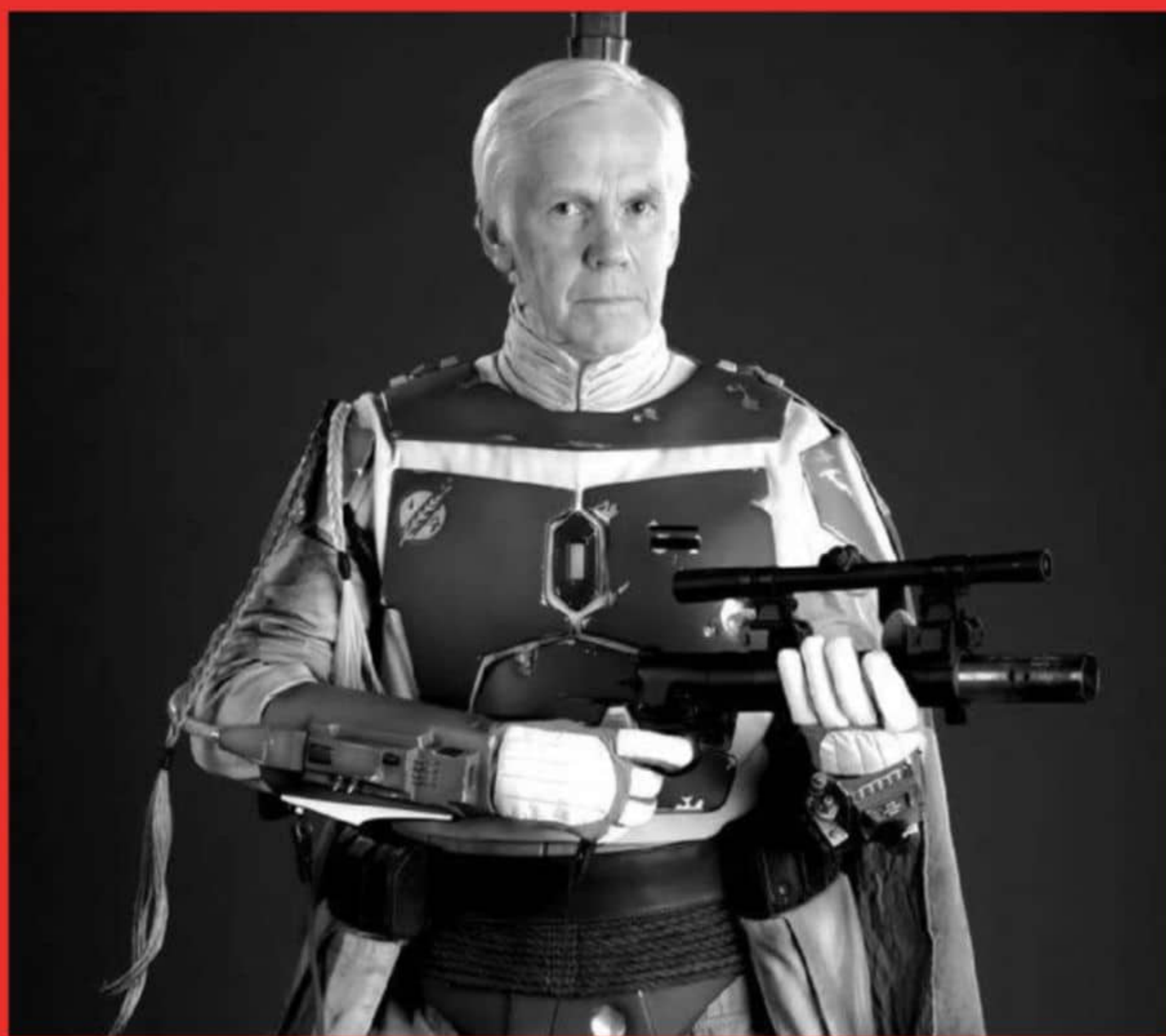
PETER MAYHEW



“I enjoyed *Return of the Jedi* the most. Chewie was more involved in that than either of the others. In *The Empire Strikes Back*, he was part of the main gang, but in *Jedi*, a lot more was expected of him because he was [originally] going to his own planet, so he knew his way around. I’m the only one who can swing through the trees except for the little Ewoks. There was also a lot more action because of them. Chewie was at the forefront and the challenge was there. I also enjoyed shooting *Jedi* in the Redwoods [of Northern California], but it was tiring. You’re running around amongst the Redwoods and it’s hard enough to run around on a concrete floor, let alone in the hot sun wearing a full costume. It was quite a change from *Empire*, when Chewie was running around in the snow. My one fear in Northern California was that someone would mistake me for Bigfoot!”
[Source: STARBURST Special #31, 1997]



JEREMY BULLOCH



"Jabba was interesting to work with. In our scenes together, I'm saying under the helmet *"Stupid fat pig. What's he doing here?"* You could mumble to yourself. He was a huge creature with an amazing laugh. It took about five people to work him, two outside and three inside. He had this awful saliva coming out of his throat - he was a wonderful creation. I enjoyed *Jedi* very much, but I got finished off fairly quickly, it was a little disappointing. I would have liked to have used all the weapons - the missile on the back and the gauntlets. It would have been fantastic, but that's the way it goes. The scene where I fly into the Sarlacc was done by a stuntman on a wire. If I was injured, they would have been in serious trouble. Will he escape the pit? Is he down there? I joke that he's opened a nightclub there, for all the bounty hunters who 'drop in'!"

[Source: STARBURST Special #32, 1997]



always liked to do. It was absolutely necessary for such a huge production as this. That way, all departments know, months ahead, who's going to be in a shot and what angles and what direction and all that sort of stuff. This is another example of why it was good to work on this movie. I didn't know any of the main stars personally. What I did was, I went around and met each one, getting to know the person a bit. Because once you start to shoot, you barely have time to be friendly with the actors. You're so exhausted by the end of the day, you can't go and wine and dine and dance and do all the things that people used to do. So I said, *"You know this character. Tell me how you feel about the character. Tell me how you feel this character's going, what this character's got to offer in terms of the public and the box office and the story."* I discovered some quite nice things about the characters, which we were able to inject into the film."

SECRETS OF THE SITH

"Dialogue was written that was not in the film. That's to do with the secrecy. Only a very few of us had the actual dialogue that was going to be in the movie. There were scenes, for instance, with Darth Vader and the actor didn't need to know the lines because they weren't going to be his lines anyway. They were looped lines. You don't see his face, you don't have a problem with lip synch, so that kind of thing could work well. David [Prowse] would be



saying something and the final dialogue would be something else. Because people like to try to find out in advance what the movie's about. But that's a bit like opening a Christmas present in November. It's nicer to wait for Christmas Day."

A TRIFECTA OF TALENT

"I think the three films are very distinct. That's inevitable. They're directed by three different people. I was a terrific fan of *Star Wars*. It's a great movie, technically and artistically. It's been tremendously neglected by the film buffs - not that anyone cares much about film buffs - but they haven't realised how skilfully it was made. In a very simplistic way. And to be that simple takes a hell of a lot of skill. In one of my early cuts of *Jedi*, I was being too sort of filmic and stylistic, even though I had set out to make the movie very much like *Star Wars*; in that simplistic style, so you feel it's more like a cartoon strip. And I discovered that my cut was too complex. I was overlapping dialogue more than I needed to. I was making things slightly harder to follow because the texture was so rich. I started off wanting it to be like that. On the other hand, the angles, the lighting, the look of things, the shading of the costumes, the way the characters approached the action, the speed with which they do it, that's personal to the director. He *can't* ape another director."

KENNY BAKER



"I also played Paploo the Ewok in *Return of the Jedi*. The outfits were hot and impossible to wear. You couldn't breathe, you couldn't see, and you just boiled over with the heat. It was unbelievable! I preferred R2-D2. I had short arms, which meant I could get inside - I didn't need much space. There wasn't much air in there, just me and a battery! Everyone likes that little robot. Forget the Ewoks! George told Richard Marquand that R2-D2 had a lot more personality with me in it, but he didn't use me too often in *Return of the Jedi*. I don't know why. I think they lost out in scenes where they could have used me, especially close-ups with dialogue where the robot can activate himself and react. They're supposed to be making another three [movies]. The robots are supposed to be in them, but anybody can be inside [R2-D2]! Hopefully I will be. I would love to do it."

[Source: STARBURST Special #31, 1997]

MASTER AND APPRENTICE

"After I had delivered the first cut, I said to George that I'd like to go away for a vacation, go to LA and talk about future projects, and he said, "*Don't be gone long, we have to work together on this,*" which was great. Usually, studios don't say that. They say, "*Goodbye!*" and hope you don't show up again [laughs]. They're aghast if you turn up for the scoring or you're there for the final mix, because they're so ashamed of what they've done to your movie in the interim. George has a reputation for being a man who takes all the footage and recuts it. That was the story on *Raiders*. And in a way, he does, because he just loves to get his hands on film."

...TO BE CONTINUED?

They're going to leave it for a while. Realistically, it's just a problem of costs. This one cost so much more than *Empire*, which cost a horrendous amount more than the first. The budget [for *Jedi*] was \$32.5 million. So you're talking about, next time around, \$49-50 million! And it'd have to make its money back. There comes a time when you have to reassess the way films are made. ✦

Original Interviewers: ED TEAM (Carrie Fisher), ALAN MURDOCH (Richard Marquand), PAT JANKIEWICZ (Peter Mayhew, Jeremy Bulloch, Kenny Baker)



**“I LEARNED
SOMETHING ABOUT
MYSELF THAT DAY
– I’M QUITE DARK
ON THE INSIDE.”**

THE DEAD SPEAK

BY
SOL
HARRIS



It's been over 10 years since the last film in the beloved Evil Dead franchise was released. Thankfully, the wait is almost over with the imminent release of EVIL DEAD RISE, written and directed by Lee Cronin, the man behind 2019's excellent The Hole in the Ground, and starring ALYSSA SUTHERLAND and Lily Sullivan as estranged sisters, Ellie and Beth. Alyssa spoke to us about what we can expect to see...

STARBURST: We know the film boasts a noted departure for the *Evil Dead* series, swapping out the remote wilderness and iconic log cabin setting in favour of a high-rise apartment block, but what can you tell us out about its new characters?

Alyssa Sutherland: Ellie has three kids. She's a single mum. At the beginning of the film, we learn that her husband has left and she's left with the kids and she's just found out that the building she lives in is being demolished, so she has to find somewhere new to live. She's a tattoo artist; she's not a mega-millionaire, so supporting three kids on her own and having to find a new place to live is going to be a real challenge for her. So she's really in a bit of a pickle as the film opens up and Beth lands on her doorstep. She hasn't heard from Beth in a while and she's tried reaching out to talk to her about where she's at and Beth has ignored her calls, so there's conflict between the two sisters. I like that there's stuff going on as the film opens. Ellie's a really cool mum and her kids are cool. They're all creative souls in their own way and one of the things that I think the film does really well is establish the characters and their

relationships very quickly. You know who everyone is right off the bat. I love that Lee was able to do that. I think it raises the stakes because you care about the characters so much and their relationship as family. That's a new thing for *Evil Dead* to do!

And after a new Necronomicon is discovered, is it Ellie who gets possessed?

Yeah. It's so wrong because she's going after the kids. It's so wrong! I had the



objective obviously to scare them, but there was more to it than that. I wanted to get under their skin and mess with their minds. I think that ultimately that's scarier – when someone can kind of get into your mind and mess with you that way. I always like to try to befriend my fellow actors and have a nice relationship with them. I'm not a method actor – it's not my style – but I did mess around while the cameras were rolling. There's one scene – it's in the trailer – where I have to tell a story like “I had this dream and it was the perfect day...” The poor kids had to shoot their reaction to that story time and time and time again. The cameras weren't on me so it didn't matter what I said and I just started changing it up every single time. I learned something about myself that day – that I'm quite dark on the inside. It was not difficult to come up with a new gross thing to tell them that I was going to do with them. I basically approached it as just playing two different characters. We got so lucky because the set was all purpose-built for us and in one location, so we were able to shoot chronologically – which is NEVER the case. It was such a gift for us to be able to film that



way. But for me there's two different characters. There are a couple of moments throughout where it's like, "Wait, is that the real Ellie coming through? Is that the demon messing with people? What is it exactly?" I know what I did for myself, but I think that's sort of for the audience to debate over. And those are some really fun moments.

As a franchise, *Evil Dead* is known for oscillating wildly between horror and comedy. The original trilogy became increasingly goofy as it progressed, while the 2013 soft-reboot went back to the original film's relatively straight horror roots. Where does *Rise* land on the spectrum?

I have such a hard time watching horror films. I am such an easy scare. A friend of mine had a nightmare — she watched the trailer and she had a nightmare that night. It was like, "Oh god. What is this going to do? My friend's family aren't going to be able to be in a room with me anymore. Maybe they shouldn't watch it!" That's a really wild thought. At the same time, I hope I do [scare the audience] because the people who are into them like being scared. It's kind of a weird thing to think about. I think there's a lot of comedy in there, too. I

“I QUITE LIKE BEING IN HARNESSES AND BEING THROWN ABOUT, BUT WHAT I DID FIND DIFFICULT WAS THE VOMITING.”



think there's a lot of dark humour. Some of the stuff that I say, I don't see how you can't laugh at it. I actually think there's a lot of comedy in there, but we filmed a lot of stuff that was a little more slapstick-y that didn't make it into the final cut. I think the slapstick can take away from the scare-factor. So, tonally, I do think it's scary, but there's a lot of humour in there if you pay attention. I mean... some of the stuff that happens is just so... I've just never made a movie like this! It's so wild and over the top. I can't help but laugh at the stuff that I know is to come for audiences.

The series is infamous for putting its actors through brutal productions. Jane Levy was buried alive to film 2013's *Evil Dead*, while series mainstay Bruce Campbell retired from his role of Ash five years ago, claiming he was no longer physically capable of doing what the series demanded from him. How was your experience?

I think I got off easy because I wasn't buried alive! The things that you would expect were difficult for me were sort of easy. I quite like being in harnesses and being thrown about. I did gymnastics when I was a kid. I did circus classes in my 20s. I quite enjoy physical

challenges. What I did find difficult was the vomiting. I thought it was going to be one shot where we can only do it one time because everything's going to get really messed up, so it's a "one and done"... and of course it wasn't. I will be very happy if I never do that again in my life. That was disgusting! But overall it was such a blast making the movie and I felt like we really got to be naughty. When I got to watch it, there was a moment I had where I was like, "Oh my god. I love us. I love this family. I love these characters". I felt like, the fun that we had, you could just kind of read. I would do it again in a heartbeat.

It's a lot of pressure to lead a movie, let alone one with the pedigree and fanbase expectations of a franchise like *Evil Dead*. How have you found that?

I think I feel a little bit more pressure now that the film is about to come out and the trailer's out there. Filming it in New Zealand can feel a little bit more removed and the filming had a very independent spirit to it. Lee was so wonderful. He really made us all very comfortable and I trusted him with his vision and I think I didn't feel as much pressure as potentially he felt, because he's got to pull everything together. But I really want to be able to do justice

to the franchise for the fans. I really genuinely hope they love it. Having seen the film now, I think we really strike an amazing balance of the remake and the original films, while also kind of taking it in a new direction. It's like nothing else I've ever seen before. We made a naughty film!

***EVIL DEAD RISE* is in cinemas from April 21st.**



DINO CRISIS

*Since taking the world silently by storm with the creation of **A Quiet Place** and unleashing the clown-filled nightmare **Haunt**, directing and writing duo **SCOTT BECK** and **BRYAN WOODS** are back with **65**, an eagerly-awaited dinosaur-sci-fi mystery starring **Adam Driver**. **STARBURST** caught up with the creative pair to discuss the film as well as looking forward to their other project, an adaptation of Stephen King's short story, **THE BOOGEYMAN**!*

STARBURST: Where did the idea for **65** come from?

Bryan Woods: Scott and I have always dreamed of making a dinosaur movie since we were kids. Dinosaurs are just so magical to a young mind, because it's incomprehensible that these giant monsters and creatures used to walk the same earth that we all live on. We've been trying to figure out how to crack it! *Jurassic Park* is such a towering achievement that it's pretty much scared off anyone from trying to make a dinosaur movie, and that's really sad as dinosaur fans. We feel like there should be as many dinosaur films every year as there are superhero movies! We kept kicking the tyres and brainstorming how we could do something that we felt we hadn't seen before, and we started narrowing in on this idea of a movie that could almost start out like *Alien*. Like a film you've seen before, with somebody piloting a spaceship, transporting passengers, and then it crash-lands into a different movie. The movie *Alien* crash-lands into *Jurassic Park* was basically the core concept.

How did you end up working with Sam Raimi once more and what he was like to collaborate with on **65?**

Scott Beck: Our history with Sam started on an anthology series called *50 States of Fright*, on which Sam was the head showrunner. He wrote and directed an episode for his home state of Michigan. The whole anthology is about a horror story in each of the United States, and we came on board to write and direct an episode for our home state of Iowa. During that experience, we got to know Sam, and his sensibilities as a filmmaker. Obviously, we've been the biggest Sam Raimi fans, as many people around the world have been, from everything from

Evil Dead, to *Spider-Man*, to *A Simple Plan*, which is one of our favourites of his work. What's so incredible about Sam is that not only is he such a brilliant filmmaker that knows how to work on each side of the spectrum of big studio filmmaking or very tiny independent films, but he's also incredibly personable. As an industry titan, you don't get the sense of ego or anything. He's very down to earth, and so the ability to collaborate and get your hands dirty with him is very, very wonderful. One thing that we absolutely adored is he'd go page by page through the script, literally reading every single word, and any time anybody in the room had a question, we would stop, and it may even just be a statement or it's like "how are you going to pull off this gag?" and it's not him trying to challenge you in a way that's destructive, it's really completely constructive. It's allowing you to put your director's hat on, and really start dissecting all the little pieces of a movie, and with something like **65**, it's a pretty giant canvas movie, it was incredibly helpful to break down in

granular fashion every little piece, and every little corner of the film.

Bryan: Also, there's nothing more surreal than Sam Raimi performing one of the parts in your script at a table reading, that's hilarious in and of itself. He makes every line better when he reads it. He is just so cool.

Adam Driver takes on the character of Mills; what was the casting process like and how has it been to work with him?

Bryan: Pretty remarkable; Adam was really our first choice for this film, because, first and foremost, he's one of our favourite actors of all time, and certainly one of the best actors of his generation. We approached Adam, and I think he got really excited. Adam's such a virtuoso with dialogue, and **65** is a more internal performance. Mills is very stoic, and dealing with a lot of grief. So it was an opportunity for Adam to do a very physical performance, where the physicality of the role, and the action in the movie is part of his character. You



"65 is the second in a trilogy of pseudo-silent films that we want to write."

by
Andrew
Dex

really have to intuit his arc and his story through watching the physicality of his role. That was a cool challenge.

Scott: One thing that Adam is so great at in every role that he does, and we got to experience first-hand, is that he doesn't make any decisions lightly in terms of who the character is, what they're doing at any given moment, and so that allows you to really break down the homework together, and figure out all of these different choices that we have. Then once you're in front of the camera, you can play with that, but there's always this huge foundation that you can build upon in the best way possible. Bryan and I have to do our homework as directors very early on; not that we're ever not on the same page, but we want to make sure that we have a mind-meld before we're opening up to other collaborators. Adam becoming a part of that process felt so encapsulated with the three of us. It was an incredible experience.

Adam is a former marine; how did that military training contribute to the movie?

Scott: As I'm sure you've seen in any of the marketing materials, the character of Mills is very handy with his rifle, and so what that meant is that you don't necessarily have to put the actor through training and boot camp, because Adam has literally been through that for years, so there's an authenticity. Again, with Adam, authenticity is the key. That was one of the important things. Ostensibly, on the surface, you see a man from space fighting dinosaurs. It's very





B-movie, but, with this film, with *A Quiet Place*, and with some of our other work, you want to make sure that there's always a level of authenticity. That was vital for our process, and for Adam's process, to make sure that authenticity was activated on every single level, through every single scene of this film.

What can you tell us about the dynamic between Mills and Koa, played by Ariana Greenblatt?

Scott: In terms of their dynamic, I think it's ostensibly a language barrier that exists between the two of them. We keep saying that this film is the second in a trilogy of pseudo-silent films that we want to write. *A Quiet Place* being the first, *65* being the second, and then there's an idea that we have for the third. I think that language barrier is certainly a key component to the conflict that runs throughout their dynamic, but Adam and Ariana were truly wonderful working together. For Ariana, you worry whether somebody at a young age will be able to keep up with somebody who's literally an Oscar-nominated actor, and be able to give all of these performances at a high level throughout the day.

Bryan: It was challenging to find a young child actor who had the chops to stand up to Adam and could do the stunt work. A kid that could run down a hill, dive into a log, barrel roll off a mountain, do all of these stunt things. Obviously, Ariana had a stunt performer, but you want it to feel real, and you want it to feel like she can achieve these things. We were impressed with not only her stunt work, but also her bravery. She was always the first one to say, "No! I want to do that, I want to get on the wires and perform". We talked about how this film chases that romantic idea of pure cinema, where you're relying on the camerawork, the sound design, the music, and the performances to tell the story, rather than dialogue and exposition.



Can you tell us a little about the effects in *65*?

Scott: One of the fun things we were able to do was some practical elements. We had a few Cirque du Soleil performers get inside of these massive dinosaur suits and some of them are in the movie. Some of them didn't make the film, but were able to articulate movements of the dinosaur so that there was something for Adam and Ariana to play off of. It's very difficult for any performer when you're acting opposite greenscreen, CG, or something that's not there, so we had a sense of some physical manifestation of the dinosaurs. Whether they were the performers in the suits or big articulated dinosaur stand-in heads, that was the key that we were trying to find. Then, as with any film of this scale, you invite the visual effects collaboration. We had this wonderful visual effects supervisor, Chris Harvey, who has done some stellar work in the past. What's incredible about a collaborator like him is he's not focused on what's going to make the coolest visual effect, he's like "What will make the story most effective beat to beat?" That's the most you could ever ask or hope for with a visual effects supervisor. The combination of him with our visual effects vendors Iloura out of Australia and this other smaller unit called Ghost VFX were able to start designing and incorporating these effects in a mandate that sometimes we called, "What you don't see is scarier". We have the power of suggestion as much as possible run throughout the movie, and then when we decide that we need to show the effects full on, that's when you really give it the most amount of love, effort, and care.

Where were your shooting locations?

Bryan: We filmed all over the place! We were in Kisatchie National Forest in Louisiana, we were in swamps, and we went to the other coast in the United States and climbed mountains in Oregon. We shot waterfalls that have never been put on film before in any movie, and it was

"The movie Alien crash-lands into Jurassic Park, that was basically the core concept!"

important to us. With so many movies these days, particularly post-COVID and with the great work that's been done in *The Mandalorian* and other series, people have relegated themselves to shooting on sets with digital environments and digital backgrounds, because of the ease and the expense. One of the things that we are proud of with *65* is that we marched out and did these real locations, and put a lot of effort into trying to create this feeling of primordial earth, this prehistoric earth and be in the elements. There were days where if it rained, we would just film, and we just embraced it. If we had bad weather and the swamp was dangerous, we just kind of went for it and embraced it, and Adam was great about that. I don't know any other movie star who would be willing to just not only shoot in harsh conditions, but *choose* to shoot in harsh conditions, and encourage us to be there, and to go for it, which is really cool.

Scott: It's funny, but it just came to mind when you were talking about all of the practical locations, is that we had a first assistant cameraman who shot on *The Revenant*, and that was shot in crazy elements. He told us how harsh it was, it was really difficult but he said that *65* was harder, which seems absurd. The fact he had to lug camera equipment up to these remote locations made for a very difficult shoot, but again, it was all in the aspiration of trying to make something as authentic as possible on location.

We must talk about your next film after this, *The Boogeyman*...

Bryan: Sure. *The Boogeyman* is a short story by Stephen King that we have really loved for so long, it's one of our favourite pieces of writing of his, it's so contained and creepy. We've been thinking about adapting it for many, many years, and we kept circling back to it. How do you take this short story of basically two characters in a room talking, how do you expand that into a movie? We finally came up with a take that we felt confident about, and we



brought that to the producers 21 Laps Entertainment, who do *Stranger Things*.

Scott: We were trying to write something that feels like a homage to King's voice - place the extraordinary in the ordinary, and make something feel very universally terrifying. Which is what has always been so incredible about his work, and the reason why it's affected everyone worldwide, and certainly us as kids, is that it seeped into our bones very early on.

Bryan: And that's why we love the idea of the Boogeyman, because it knows no barriers. Every place in the world has their own version of the Boogeyman, and what that means to them, and for us. It was such a universal idea that is so terrifying, we couldn't resist.

What it was like to work alongside director Rob Savage?

Scott: His career has just been really incredible; you've got *Host* and *Dashcam*, two movies that really provoked us as fans and audience members. I think with this film, Rob really shows his visual muscles in emotional storytelling, because the two other films are ostensibly in the found footage subgenre. It's exciting to see him make a film that delivers a big theatrical movie.

Bryan: He's particularly skilled at playing the audience like a piano. He knows how to make you jump, and he knows how to make you lean in, and it's been really fun to watch him adapt this work. We're really pleased.

Scott: It was fun, we watched it again yesterday - it was like a little talent and crew screening - and even though these were all people involved with the film, you get to see how they're tensing up, and how they're trying to hide away from the scares!

65 roars into cinemas on March 10th, while *THE BOOGEYMAN* will be terrifying moviegoers from June 2nd.

TRANSMISSION IMPOSSIBLE

Captured in black and white while mixing real archival footage with new scenes, LOLA tells the 1940s-set story of two sisters, Mars (Stefanie Martini) and Thomasina (Emma Appleton), who build a machine that can see media images from the future. Director ANDREW LEGGE has crafted a unique time travel movie that completely submerges the viewer in its wartime era, while also posing that age-old question 'what would you do if you could manipulate time itself?' We spoke with Andrew Legge to discuss the highly detailed process of piecing together his debut feature film...

STARBURST: Where did the initial idea for LOLA originate?

Andrew Legge: It came out of a short film that I had done in 2009 called *The Chronoscope*, which is about a scientist who can see into the past. Like many filmmakers do with their shorts, I wanted to eventually develop it into a feature, but the limitations of just seeing into the past made it more difficult to sustain over a feature, so we came up with the idea of seeing into the future. If you can see into the future, then you can change the future. So it went from there, and what made it exciting for me was the idea of seeing not just information from the future, but actual media, culture, and being exposed to music and movies. That really hooked me. It made me want to do the film more than anything!

How did you first meet your co-writer Angeli Macfarlane, and what has she been like to collaborate with?

She was great! She was recommended to me. She came on board initially as the script editor and she made these big notes, which were really good, but showed how bad some of the stuff that I was trying to do was, in terms of writing. Eventually, I was like "Well, do you want to do a draft? Because you'll do it better!" And she said, "Okay cool" [laughs]. So she did a draft, and then we kind of worked on another draft together after that. I find writing the hardest thing. Having the idea, and then trying to dramatise that idea, sustaining it over 80 pages. It's way harder than making film!

With time travel, you can focus on any period, why did you opt for World War II?

Culturally, I think it's really interesting because World War II was like the era just before we had the Cultural Revolution in the '50s and '60s with pop music, the youth movements and all of that. World War II created a new society. So, in a way the juxtaposition of these women in this film, in this era, which is on the dawn of this new Cultural Revolution, I thought was really interesting. I think if it was set in the '60s and they were listening to music from the '80s, that's not nearly as interesting as women in the '40s listening to music from the '60s and '70s.

There's that great scene where they tune into LOLA and it's playing David Bowie...

Yeah, exactly! So imagine if they were in the '60s and they tuned into Queen from the '80s, it wouldn't be as impactful.

How did Stefanie Martini and Emma Appleton become involved as your leads, Mars and Thomasina?

We had a casting director called Jessie Frost, and we initially cast Emma. I remember it was quite interesting because initially, we were thinking of Emma for Mars, but Emma was more interested in playing Thomasina. She said that she liked playing characters who weren't totally likeable! Which is interesting because she did a show for Channel 4 called *Traitors*, where she played a character who isn't totally sympathetic - she is quite right wing - so Emma liked that idea of playing that kind of character. Then once I cast Emma, you're trying to cast against her, so that's how Stefanie came in, again through the casting director. I hadn't worked with either of them before, I

had seen them both on TV, but I didn't know them. Another big factor was that Stefanie had to be able to sing, because she does all of the singing herself in the movie, so that was a huge part of that casting as well.

How would you describe these characters when we first meet them?

Mars is a more extroverted, heart on her sleeve character, Thomasina is more introverted. They both have quite a different outlook in life, which is dramatised in how they see LOLA, and how they think LOLA should be used. For Mars, LOLA is like a little window into these other worlds, and into music, film, and all of this cultural stuff. For Thomasina, LOLA is basically a weapon. So they have a totally different perspective on how you should use this machine.

Their dynamic certainly gets strained as the movie goes on...

Yeah! They've made this extraordinary invention, and their ideology on how that invention should be used is very different. I guess Mars is quite naïve in a way, and Thomasina is that really well-intentioned scientist who messes up. You unleash this force, and you actually don't really think through the consequences.

The movie is in black and white, with a handheld camera feel. Did you always want to shoot it that way? What do you think that aesthetic brings to the viewing experience?

A few of my shorts are black and white, I love black and white! Before I went into filmmaking, I used to do a lot of

BY
**ANDREW
DEX**

photography, and I used to do that in monochrome. I had my darkrooms, and I love that whole kind of geeking around, doing home processing, manipulating negatives. When I was at college, I remember making the discovery that you can actually develop movie film using just normal black and white chemicals. I remember the first time just shooting a roll of film on a Krasnogorsk, which is a Russian camera, and then processing it in the darkroom at college. I always wanted to do a black and white feature. I guess for this film it helps to immerse you in that world of the characters, because I think in our heads we kind of imagine World War II and that period in black and white, like those old newsreels. It became integral to it. And then also just trying to create something that felt - because it's a weird film, as it's a montage in a way - like a collage of different sources of footage. She's got her newsreel, her LOLA footage, and her own footage that she shot of her sister. She's sticking it all together. That was always a challenge in the edit, to try to make it so that it wasn't totally jagged. Doing the whole thing in black and white helps make it uniform. I remember that was a big challenge when we were grading it as well. The main thing for the grade was that the film had to feel like it was from the '40s, but we didn't want the audience to be able to distinguish between our footage and archive. We wanted it all to feel uniform, even though you're doing jump cuts and jagged cuts. I think we got that with the black and white. I was thinking it would have been cool to have shot Mars' stuff on Super 8 Kodachrome, which they would have had in the '40s. It could have



**“LOLA IS A LITTLE
WINDOW INTO THESE
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“WE DIDN’T WANT THE AUDIENCE TO BE ABLE TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN THE ARCHIVE FOOTAGE AND OUR OWN.”

been quite beautiful.

You trained your cast how to use specific handheld cameras, what kind of challenges did that present?

That was part of my pitch. I said that we wanted to do this movie - a weird, low budget thing - and you'll live in Ireland for six weeks in the rain, but you'll get to operate the cameras yourself. And I think they loved that! Stefanie really warmed to it. They had to come over to Ireland during lockdown and isolate for two weeks, which was a little bit of a godsend, as I was able to give them my Bolex and some rolls of film. I showed Stefanie how to use it, and then she went off with Emma, and was able to film stuff on the reels. I taught them how to develop film as well. They did their own session for an afternoon where they shot footage on the Bolex, developed it, and then they dried it. We made a homemade telecine machine with an old 16mm editing rig that you hand crank, and then we videoed it on our phones. We got this cool footage straight away. Sometimes Oona Menges, the director of photography, would operate the camera, but it was quite interesting that I found that the performances were more believable when Stefanie did it. She liked that challenge.

It just makes it more authentic in the end as well...

Yes! Her camera was a Bolex, which is a hand-cranked, Swiss camera. You wind it up, and you get about 30 seconds out of it. It's very beautiful, and it creates these really beautiful images. I had these old 1950s light lenses on the Bolex, so you have



three lenses on a turret, so you can go from wide-angle then turn the turret to go into a telephoto lens. For the newsreel sequences, we used a Newman Sinclair, which is a 35mm camera from the late 1930s that were used a lot for newsreels. They were tough, British cameras, and they're beautiful. The one we had was used by Stanley Kubrick on *A Clockwork Orange*, when Alex tries to commit suicide. Apparently Kubrick got the Newman Sinclair, put a cheap lens onto it, put in their 200 feet of 35mm film, and wound it up. You get about 90 seconds out of a Newman Sinclair motor. So they had the camera running, and they chucked it out the window. The lens smashed, but the camera was totally perfect. They took the film out, developed it, and that's his POV. We had a few other cameras as well - we had an old Arri 16, which Sebastian used as his camera. We used standard Arri 416, which is a modern Arriflex 16mm, but we put old lenses onto it, and that was our camera for when we were doing longer takes with a lot of dialogue, because the Bolex is a pain in the ass when you're trying to do dialogue! I found that my favourite shots were the Bolex shots. The very end shot was the Bolex, and I think it's really beautiful.

Can you tell us about the process of filming a brand-new scene, and then combining it with actual footage from the past?

It varied. Some were fairly straightforward. The technical stuff was [SPOILER ALERT!] when Hitler came to see LOLA, and the way we did

that was that we reverse engineered it. We found these shots of Hitler when he is visiting the Volkswagen factory and looking at this prototype beetle. I found three or four shots of him coming into the factory floor, walking down towards camera, looking at the Volkswagen, reacting excitedly to it. We designed our sequence of him inspecting LOLA around that. We placed that in storyboards and then had to fit in the gaps. The scene with the balloon that says 'Nazi Whores' was similar. I was going through archives looking for angry mob scenes, and I couldn't find any, but I found this footage of this protest where they've got this balloon. Then we did a recce and found locations that looked like the locations in that footage. We shot in Dublin, and that footage is from London, but we found this Georgian kind of building in Dublin which had that kind of archway that looked like the archway in the archive footage. And then again, we reverse engineered our storyboard, so that it matched the archive, and it worked quite well. We had a balloon on the set, and our production designer built a balloon that was like the balloon in the footage, and then we put our slogan on the balloon, and then we did our shots, matching what was in the archive, and then cut it in. The grader and our VFX people were able to match the slogan so that the balloons look identical, but it's cut between our balloon and the archive balloon. So that was kind of how we did it.

The design of the LOLA machine itself is really interesting. Can you tell us about how you built it?

It was designed by a guy called Jack Phelan, he does a lot of theatre design, but he is also very into computers and visuals. Then a guy called Rob Clarke built it. The brief was two things. It had to feel grounded in the era, like something that the sisters would make in the '40s, it was very much dictated by the technology at the time, and by what military radios look like, and cathode-ray tubes, all of that. It also had to be made from the stuff that they would have access to. We didn't want it to have a cyberpunk look. The second thing was just the logic of it, we wanted to have this radio/TV feel, but it also had to be quite grand, because we wanted it to be bigger than the characters. It had to be towering over them. Then, it had to be functioning. The cathode-ray tube that we use is a real piece of glass that was made for us, then we've got a projector behind it. They painted the back of the screen white and projected onto it. So, while it's not a cathode-ray tube, it's a functioning screen, so when you see the images on the screen, the actors are seeing that, it's a practical effect.

Are you looking forward to finally getting the film in front of an audience?

Yes. It's got beautiful music, it looks beautiful, and the actors are brilliant. And hopefully it's a slightly unique sci-fi story, too. I think it's fun!

And we agree - read our review on page 107 to find out more! LOLA opens in UK cinemas on April 7th, is available digitally from May 8th, and hits Blu-ray July 3rd.

ON THE OFFENSIVE

By Martin Unsworth

Eating Miss Campbell is a 'spiritual' sequel to your earlier movie, *My Bloody Banjo*. Why did it take so long to come about?

I filmed my first feature *My Bloody Banjo* in the summer of 2014. I was 29 years old and naïve to the whole film business; my film school came from listening to audio commentaries on DVDs and reading books. However, in 2012, I hopped onto a plane and flew over to Buffalo Niagara to work on the *Return to Nuke 'Em High* movies. Working on a Troma set taught me everything; seeing how other departments communicate with each other, and seeing how filmmaking is a collaboration. I made so many lifelong friends on that production, people I'm still collaborating with.

My Bloody Banjo had its world premiere at FrightFest in August 2015 and screened to a sold out audience. The movie then screened at festivals worldwide, and it was such an exciting experience. I emailed many sales agents and distributors, and the constant response I received from people was "we don't know how to market this movie". I reached out to Lloyd Kaufman at Troma, because *My Bloody Banjo* was a love letter to the Troma movies that I grew up watching. Lloyd was happy to distribute *My Bloody Banjo*, but he was very honest, explaining that the home video market is on its arse, and if I'm able to find money elsewhere, to go for it! There was only ever one person who was honest with me, when trying to find a distributor for the film, and that was Lloyd. We settled on the American distribution company in 2016 that agreed to stock the movie in Walmart, and really push the title on their label. Instead, they cut the film, removing all the genital mutilation, and dumped it on Amazon MOD [DVD-Rs made on demand] and Amazon Prime. The distributor leaked the movie before its release, so I refused to promote it

A talented spark on the UK Indie scene,

LIAM REGAN is about to unleash his second film, **EATING MISS CAMPBELL**, on the public following its hugely successful festival run. We spoke with the writer/director about his influences and bringing his vision to the screen...

and I knew that one day we would re-edit it and release the true director's cut, I just didn't know it would take seven years to get there! I still haven't made any money from the release. There are so many corrupt distributors out there who will bury you in fabricated expenses and keep the earnings of the movie. There's a statistic out there that states that only 3% of British filmmakers have the opportunity to make a second movie, and I feel so fortunate to break the *Banjo* curse and make *Eating Miss Campbell*.

What was the inspiration for *Eating Miss Campbell*?

Originally, it was titled *Parents Evening*, and I was co-writing it with different people. I worked with Danny Naylor [Keres] on a draft, and David Malcolm [Mannequins] on another, but something wasn't vibing. I felt I was writing a film that had more mainstream appeal. Instead, I took a trip to Spain and wrote a first draft of *Eating Miss Campbell* within a week. I promised myself we would go into production that following January.

Kevin Smith is a huge inspiration on my work too, and I love how he weaves characters in and out of his 'View Askewniverse'. He would make connections with his previous films through characters and dialogue. When I decided to make a semi-sequel to *My Bloody Banjo*, I wanted to bring back characters who died in the last movie, like how they bring Kenny back every week in *South Park* after he dies in a horrible way. So, Mr Sawyer [Vito Trigo], Clyde Toulon [Laurence R. Harvey], and Deetz Montgomery [Dani Thompson] all returned.

All of my friends turned vegan, so I thought it would be funny for a character to have the moral dilemma of being a vegan but have an insatiable taste for human flesh. *Mean Girls*, *Heathers*, *Jawbreaker*, and *Tragedy Girls* were also major influences; I love the Hollywood trope of casting 30-year-olds as high school students, and using a lot of archetypes like the jock or the cliquey mean girls, but playing those stereotypes up to 11! I also wanted to set the movie in my fictional British town of Henenlotter, but also have the American high school clichés like lockers and yellow school buses. Because I was making a Troma movie, I wanted to tackle socio-political issues like high school massacres and sexual deviants, which is why there are so many Weinstein references!

The film's very meta – have you made a note of how many references to other films/real-world events there are?

I haven't made note whatsoever, and the references weren't always intentional, sometimes it comes from my subconscious. I've read a lot of reviews that mention the references in a detrimental manner to the movie. I don't think it's any different to a Bloodhound Gang track or Eminem, and with it being a meta movie, I feel it's fun to call out references to other movie franchises, like all the *American Pie* sequels. Even though people mention all the references, there's possibly over a hundred that they haven't picked up on, and I feel a lot of them are pretty obscure. For example, one reference we made was from the *Apocalypse Soon: The Making of Citizen Toxie* documentary, and

"i've been mentored by the greatest shit-disturber in filmmaking, Lloyd Kaufman!"



unless you've seen that a dozen times, you ain't gonna get it!

Laurence R. Harvey always gives his all – his character in *Banjo* is particularly heartbreaking, while in *Eating Miss Campbell*, he's a bit more full-on. Was that role written with him in mind?

We always had a pervy human resource manager in the screenplay, but after the second draft of the script, I decided to bring back *Banjo* characters and make it a spiritual sequel, but also being very selective with which continuity we choose for each character. So for example, in *My Bloody Banjo*, Mr Sawyer and Clyde Toulon were enemies, to the point where Mr Sawyer makes Clyde Toulon blow his own brains out, and now in *Eating Miss Campbell*, they're best buddies. Maybe I'll bring Clyde back for a third *Banjo* movie, where it's a road trip buddy comedy!

What was the shoot like? What were the major challenges?

Shooting began in January 2020 for 17 days. The screenplay was 70 pages long, and from my experience on *My Bloody Banjo*, where our 90-page script turned into a two-hour assembly cut, I assumed that 70 pages would take us to that sweet 84 minutes running time that we were looking for, and then this little thing called COVID happened, you may have heard of it? When I spoke to my editor Jack Hayes and asked if we have a feature, he was hesitant to explain that we had a 60-minute cut, so we were missing an entire act! So much for the 70 pages equal 84 minutes equation! We had to shut down production for 18

months; during that time, we were able to focus on the edit and find out what worked and what didn't. That gave me a chance to rewrite, and create three more characters that weren't initially there during the first shoot. Unfortunately, during this time, my best friend Blade Braxton, who plays the witty and comical Midnight Rose in the movie, passed away, so I had to battle through my own struggles of losing a best friend, and having to rewrite a script, which featured him in the reshoot scenes.

Filming resumed for seven days in September 2021, and the budget we initially secured for post-production had to be spent on another leg of filming. In some ways, it felt like shooting another movie. We had to fly over the actors that we could, but unfortunately, due to Australia being on full lockdown, we couldn't fly over Lala, which proved extremely difficult, as we had to establish an act two relationship between Miss Campbell and Beth Conner. However, with smoke and mirrors we kinda get away with it; we had a stand-in played by my good friend Sarah Waldron, who doubled as Miss Campbell. She also plays a server in the Hell's Kitchen Diner scene, and a bully in the Mean Girls montage.

You're not afraid to be offensive in your films – which is good, you should push the boundaries – but is there anything you'd consider 'going too far'?

I go by the *South Park* quote "Either it's all okay, or none of it is". I feel everything is fair game, but it's all about context and understanding the satirical nature of the scene. People have the right to be offended, which means I





"Only 3% of British filmmakers have the opportunity to make a second movie."

have the right to make jokes. Now, if something I make is deemed offensive, that's a subjective and personal emotion towards the person taking offence. When you're making a Troma movie, all cards are off the table, plus I've been mentored by the greatest shit-disturber in filmmaking, Lloyd Kaufman!

You've worked with Troma for a while – how does being on a Lloyd Kaufman set differ to being on a Liam Regan set?

People I work with have said they see a lot of Lloyd in me, in terms of how explosive and passionate I can be on set, but it all comes from a positive place. I feel if you want to make a good entertaining movie, you need to sacrifice a lot. A shooting schedule can easily change on a dime, so you have to be extremely proactive to react to anything that may change. For example, if it's an exterior scene and the weather is bad, make sure that we have a backup interior location ready to be dressed, or if we're going to bukkake an actress with fake blood, you better make damn sure there are towels and a therapist on standby! I always say that anything that can go wrong, will go wrong on a film set, it's the nature of the beast. You can prepare the best you can, but there are always going to be problem-solving scenarios. In a way, that's what makes a movie better; if it's easy, anybody would be able to do this, but it's very time-consuming and stressful, but also extremely rewarding at the same time, especially as a writer, director, and producer. You could say filmmaking is a

form of therapy. Which I most certainly require!

How do you see the UK indie scene?

There are so many talented people in the UK indie scene. People like Stewart Sparke [*How to Kill Monsters*], Paul Butler [*Book of Monsters*], Charlie Bond [*Powertool Cheerleaders*] David Malcolm [*Mannequins*], Sam Mason Bell [*Acting*], Katie Bonham [*Mab*], MJ Dixon [*Slasher House*], Dominic Brunt [*Wolf Manor*], and I've possibly missed out many names, and will regret not shouting them out! What I love about the UK indie scene is the DIY attitude, it's extremely punk rock, making movies however we can, by any means necessary. UK indie films, especially on a micro-budget level, have the freedom to tell our stories how we want, and we can be our own censors in that respect. What I do see, unfortunately, is a lot of UK distributors taking advantage of first-time filmmakers who are trying to navigate the waters and are promised riches and 'back-end' on a movie. Then they're drowned in fabricated expenses, become jaded with filmmaking, and never have the chance to make a movie again, which is truly sad. I was in that position at one time. So I feel like UK indie filmmakers need to be smarter in terms of securing a minimum guarantee for each territory, an advance

upfront, so you can make back your budget, but to also retain your UK physical rights, and sell directly to your audience.

LIAM REGAN has launched a home video label in the UK titled REFUSE FILMS, releasing movies by indie filmmakers from around the world. Visit REFUSEFILMS.COM, where you'll be able to buy MY BLOODY BANJO: DIRECTOR'S CUT, out now, and pre-order EATING MISS CAMPBELL, coming soon. ✨



A full-page background image of Zachary Levi as Shazam. He is wearing his iconic red suit with gold lightning bolt accents and a white cape. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the left. The background is a soft, cloudy white.

LEVI 101

by Andrew Dex

Back in 2019, SHAZAM! blasted its way onto the big screen and changed the DCEU that we know forever. With comedy, heart, and a shedload of incredible action, audiences were left wanting more. Alongside his now-super-charged siblings, SHAZAM! FURY OF THE GODS sees Billy Batson, aka Shazam, attempt to figure out his place in the world, all the while battling the Daughters of Atlas. We caught up with lead actor ZACHARY LEVI to uncover everything fans can expect from the highly anticipated sequel...

STARBURST: How was it working with your director David F. Sandberg again after four years?

Zachary Levi: I was just so stoked that we all got to come back together again; to make another movie. None of it is promised! The dream is that you get to do a franchise, or at least a trilogy or something like that. So when the 'powers that be' saw fit to give us a sequel, I was just so pumped. And I was pumped that we got the team back together, the cast is all back. Our writer, Henry Gayden, wrote another fantastic script, David getting to direct it, Peter Safran being able to produce it. It was our family, our 'Shazamily', as it were. So when we all got to come back into this, and make this movie, I was very grateful for that. David's rise is incredible; he was making YouTube short films, and then he did *Lights Out* and *Annabelle: Creation*, his third movie was *Shazam!* With the pandemic and everything, he didn't get to do anything in between *Shazam!* and *Fury of the Gods*, so his fourth movie was a massive franchise sequel, and I think that he did a great job. Objectively, and I know I'm biased, I really do think that we made a better movie this time, and that's saying something, because the first one was pretty darn good. So I'm really grateful for the progression of it all.

What we sense from the film is that Shazam is questioning himself, there's a bit of an imposter syndrome situation going on...

Definitely. When we meet Billy in the second movie, he's trying to juggle a lot of things. He's the leader of this group of superheroes and he's trying to be the best leader that he can, keeping everybody on the same page, working together as a team. It's difficult, because they're all kids and they all want to run around doing their own things. He's struggling with that, but underneath, he's trying to keep everybody together. He realises he's about to turn eighteen, and in the States once you're eighteen you're a legal adult, and then you're no longer covered in the foster care programme, you're now responsible for yourself. You leave your foster family and that's terrifying, because it took him fourteen years to finally find a family. He loves this family and just a few years on, he's afraid that he's going to lose that family. So there are all of these things that are broiling underneath, and that's really his whole emotional journey. Not feeling like he's good enough to be this leader, and also not feeling like he's good enough to stay a part of this family, because once he's eighteen he is gone!



“WITH MORE BUDGET AND TIME, WE WERE ABLE TO BUILD EVEN BETTER ACTION SEQUENCES AND SET PIECES, ALL THAT FUN STUFF!”



Is there anything that you really wanted to bring to portraying Shazam this time around, to really help capture the Billy Batson that we know now?

The most important thing for me was that we captured the same core elements that made the first movie special and made people like it. Those were heart, humour, and charm. With more budget and time on this one, we were able to build on that. We were able to build even better action sequences, set pieces, all of that kind of fun stuff! But those are inherent through all action movies, those are staples, everybody has those. But everybody *doesn't* have heart, humour, and charm, and I think we were able to bring those, that was first and foremost. Then, as far as the evolution of Billy as a character, you know, I wanted to make sure that I was playing a different version of Billy from the first one to this one, because he's three years older. A fourteen-year-old kid and a seventeen-year-old kid are very different. Particularly nowadays. I was just trying to emulate as best I could. How do they behave, how do they sound, how do they move, what's their vibe? I tried to just capture that as best I could.



You and Asher Angel don't get to spend time together on-screen, what do you think he brings to the character of Billy?

Oh, I love what Asher brings! It's fun because he actually gets to play more the straight man in all of this, because he's a really earnest kid. Well, he's not even a kid anymore, he's like a young man. He's very earnest, he's got a lot of heart in there, but it's also very serious sometimes. A lot of what you see in the younger Billy is more of that seriousness, but when he's transformed into his super self, he's jazzed. He's got all of this energy, all of this power! So, there's a little more confidence in him, even though it's sometimes fake

confidence. I think it's really fun how we get to balance all of that out.

Shazam and Freddy Freeman obviously hang out a lot in the first movie, and Freddy helps to shape the Shazam that we see. How fun has that back and forth been for you to work on with Jack Dylan Grazer over the years, and what can we expect from it in the sequel?

Jack is so much fun, he's definitely one of the most talented young actors I've ever had the pleasure of working opposite. Particularly with comedy, because you either get it or you don't. Jack, at a very young age, has understood comedy, so we got to have

“I’M BIASED, BUT I THINK THAT WE MADE A BETTER MOVIE THIS TIME, AND THAT’S SAYING SOMETHING, BECAUSE THE FIRST ONE WAS PRETTY DARN GOOD!”



a lot of fun together on the first film. We’ve had some fun together on this one too, but we don’t work as much together in this film, the storylines go a little bit different. I’m not going to expand on that, because I don’t want to spoil anything [laughs], but you’ll understand when you see the movie.

In the first film, the idea of being an orphan is so crucial to shaping how we see Shazam. Why do you think this element is so important to Shazam’s story, and how does this present itself in *Fury of the Gods*?

Being an orphan is kind of thematic to a lot of superheroes. Batman is an orphan, Superman is an orphan. There are a lot of orphans! The orphan aspect isn’t necessarily super original, but it always lends itself, because you’ve got somebody who is trying to find out who they are. “Who am I in all of this? Who am I if I don’t have parents? Who is going to be my tribe, my community, my family?” The really cool thing about our particular franchise is that we have an orphan that is literally adopted into the foster care programme, by a family that already has a bunch of other orphans in there. So that is unique amongst superheroes, and more than that, you’ve got multi-racial, multi-



cultural kids across the spectrum, and even some that are disabled like Freddy and his crutch. You’ve got a lot of representation on the screen that just doesn’t exist naturally in other IP, and we get to bring that to life with lots of love and grace, not trying to be super obtuse about it, like “Look at this thing we are trying to signal!”, it’s just background, this is life. And I think that for Billy specifically, like I said, one of his big struggles in the movie is “I don’t want to lose this family”. That’s a little bit of a struggle for Clark Kent, depending on what storyline you’re looking at, but no one’s looking to lose their family in any of these orphan stories. With Batman, they’re

pretty much gone - he’s got Alfred, but he’s a much more dark and brooding character.

What were Rachel Zegler, Helen Mirren, and Lucy Liu like to work with?

All of them are so great, they’re all so talented and so lovely. Not just physically, but like, philosophically, lovely people. They all crush their roles. I got to work with Rachel a little bit, I got to work with Lucy a little bit, and I got to work with Helen a little bit more. Dude, she is a Dame, she’s a literal Dame, but you’d never even know it because she doesn’t flaunt it. She’s very much like Sir Anthony Hopkins, who is like, “Call me Tony!” It’s very chill, she’s so wonderful, and she’s

THE WIZARD

**Returning director
DAVID F. SANDBERG
joins us to talk all things
SHAZAM!...**

STARBURST: What was it like to work with Zachary once more? Has your working dynamic changed or progressed since the first movie?

David F. Sandberg: Zachary is great! He adds so much to the character, so much of Shazam is him. He has that sort of kid energy. I don't know if the working relationship has changed that much, because a lot of the time I just let him do his thing. That's why I do quite a lot of takes when we do *Shazam!* movies, because no two takes are ever the same. He's going to change things up, he's just inherently funny. The weird thing is, he said himself, he often likes the stuff he says more when he is off-camera, because he keeps making stuff up. So he's great to work with in that way, he surprises me. It keeps things interesting on set!

The Daughters of Atlas characters Hespera (Helen Mirren), Kalypso (Lucy Liu), and Anthea (Rachel Zegler), aren't entirely based on the comics. Can you tell us about how those characters first came to life, and what fans can expect from them?

It's pretty interesting that they were not just like the typical, "Yeah, we found another bad guy from the comic book to bring in", they're actually from mythology. It's cool for two reasons: one is that it makes for an interesting dynamic with the villains because the powers of Shazam were stolen from the gods. It's not Shazam's fault, he didn't steal them, but, of course, the sisters want them back, and you can understand that, because it was taken from them. You don't really sympathise with their methods, because they're evil, but it's a little bit morally grey, which I think is interesting. And then with mythology, they're sort of the original superheroes. So it fits very well into this world, and it was a lot of fun to be able to bring mythological creatures onto the streets of our modern day, so you have minotaurs, harpies, and cyclopes all running around and causing mayhem.

What do you think Helen, Lucy, and Rachel have brought to the film?

Credibility! We have Dame Helen Mirren in the movie! That classes things up quite a bit. No, they were our top choices, and they said yes, which is amazing. Helen is a legend, as is Lucy Liu. With Rachel, I had heard about her, but *West Side Story* wasn't out yet, so I just knew that she was in that, but I hadn't seen anything from it, and I didn't



even know she could sing or anything, so she just auditioned along with everyone else. She had such charm and charisma, she's so watchable, and so talented. It really was a dream cast. All three of them are so dedicated and so professional. They would hang around on set, just talk, they were so down to do anything. Helen is doing stunts in this movie, we put her up on wires in the air! I'm very fortunate with the actors that I get to work with.

And your core cast has expanded significantly this time, too, what with Billy's orphan family getting more screen time as their adult super-selves...

Yeah, that's the whole reason for returning. We only got that little glimpse of the family in the first movie, and now we get to see more of them, we get to know them more, and that's what you want to see after you've seen the first movie. We get to deal with the challenges for the family. Now they have to balance being superheroes with going to school and getting a job. Billy is really anxious about losing this family that he just found, because they are getting older and they can't live in a foster home forever. They have to go out and do their own thing. Freddy wants to be a superhero on his own, like, "Why do



we have to do everything together?" So it's about his struggle, trying to keep the family together, trying to figure out what his position in life is as a superhero. Like we've seen in the trailer, Shazam is talking about how there's already Aquaman, Batman, and all of these heroes. "What's my thing?" That's what he needs to figure out.

Chris Morgan joins Shazam!'s writer Henry Gayden on script duties here, what do you think he brought to the film?

Chris is great! And Henry is as awesome as always. It was kind of funny to have the two of them work on this movie. Henry wrote that *Fast & Furious* joke, and Chris Morgan, of course, is the writer of *Fast & Furious*! It was fun to have them riffing off of each other like that. Henry is always so great. The first time where I felt like "Oh yeah, I definitely want to do a sequel" was looking at his outline, and his script for this, and what it would be.

What about Shazam! Fury of the Gods are you most excited for audiences to see?

This movie has a little bit of everything - it has even more Shazam, it has mythological creatures, city-wide destruction, lots of humour, and plenty of action. It even has some horror! Oh, and you get Helen Mirren kicking ass.



“DAME HELEN MIRREN IS EVERYTHING YOU WANT HER TO BE - SHE’S COOLER THAN THE COOL!”

everything you actually want her to be. She’s cooler than the cool! So that was delightful. The whole thing was just so fun, and Helen and I got these full-on, multi-page scenes, just her and I. It’s like, “What is this? What’s life? How lucky!”

At the end of the first movie, Billy’s orphan family had only just scratched the surface of their powers, so, how fun has it been to see them explore these abilities even further, and what else can viewers expect to see from this side of the orphan family?

It’s really fun, because we did a good job of keeping that a secret in the first movie, and fortunately a lot of people didn’t spoil that when they went to go and see the movie. So it’s a great reveal, “Oh my gosh, all of the kids have powers!” and now we really get to explore all of that, like what are all of those powers, what do they look like, manifesting in each one of them, how does it all work as a team effort? But they’re young, and they’re still figuring it out, and they’re stumbling through it, and all of that jazz. There’s a lot of really cool action and funny moments. It hits them all differently, some like it more than others. Freddy, who was the superhero nerd, who knows everything and loves it all, was so jealous that Billy gets the powers, because he was like, “I’m the one who knows all of this stuff”, now he literally gets to go and be his

dream self. So that creates his own little thing, where he wants to go and do this, and Billy is like “No, we are all supposed to work as a team”. So, thematically, there are a lot of really cool things that we get to explore now, with all of the kids having their own powers.

We assume that you got to spend more time with the older orphan actors in this movie compared to the first one?

Yeah. It was awesome, man. We all genuinely get along and love each other. Grace, Meagan, Ross, D.J., Adam, and myself, we got to have a little bit of time together on the first, but we got significantly more time on this one, and it just galvanised us even more. I love working with my younger counterparts, they’re a lot of fun, but as an adult, it’s nice to work with adults sometimes, too!

SHAZAM! FURY OF THE GODS flies into cinemas March 17th.

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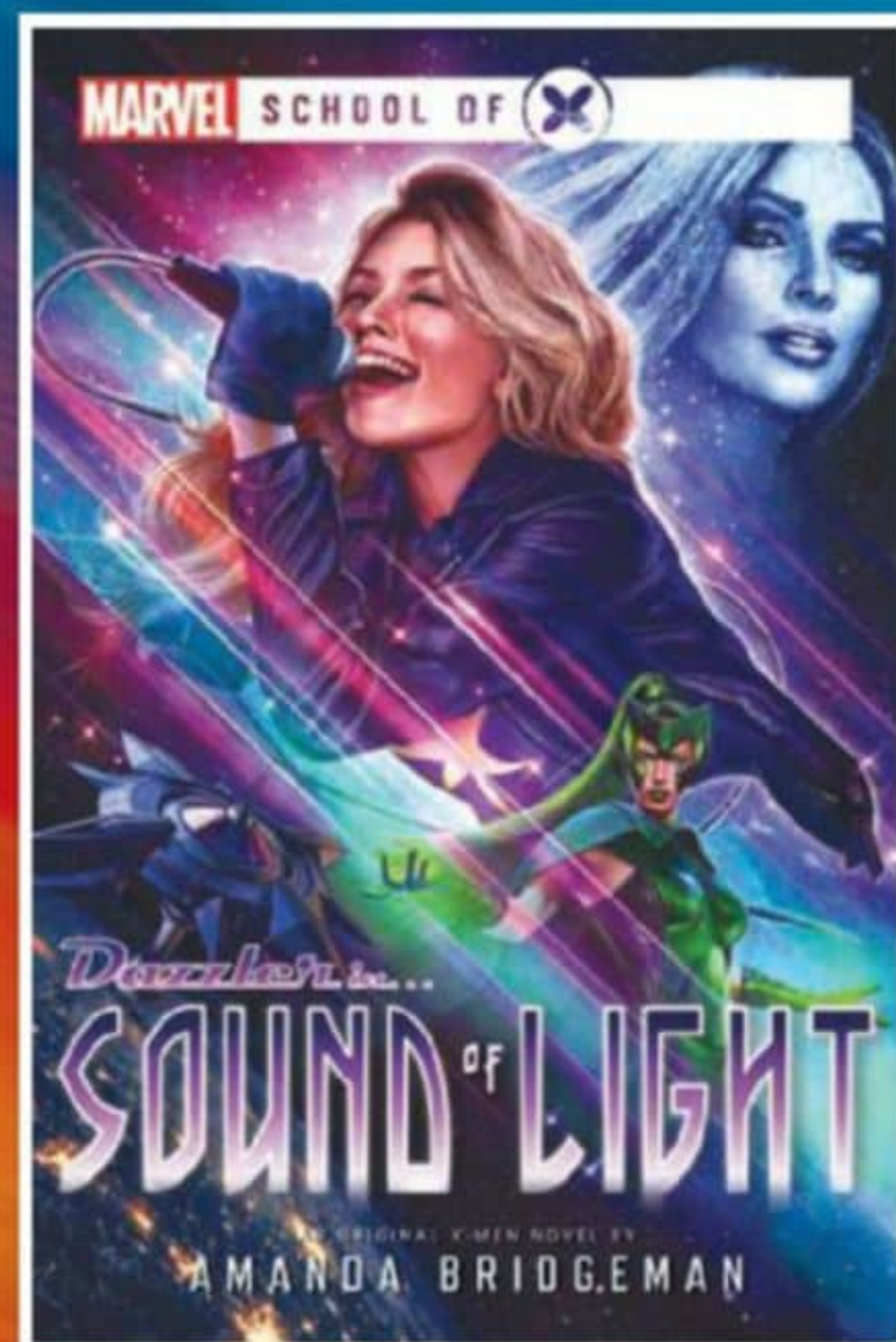
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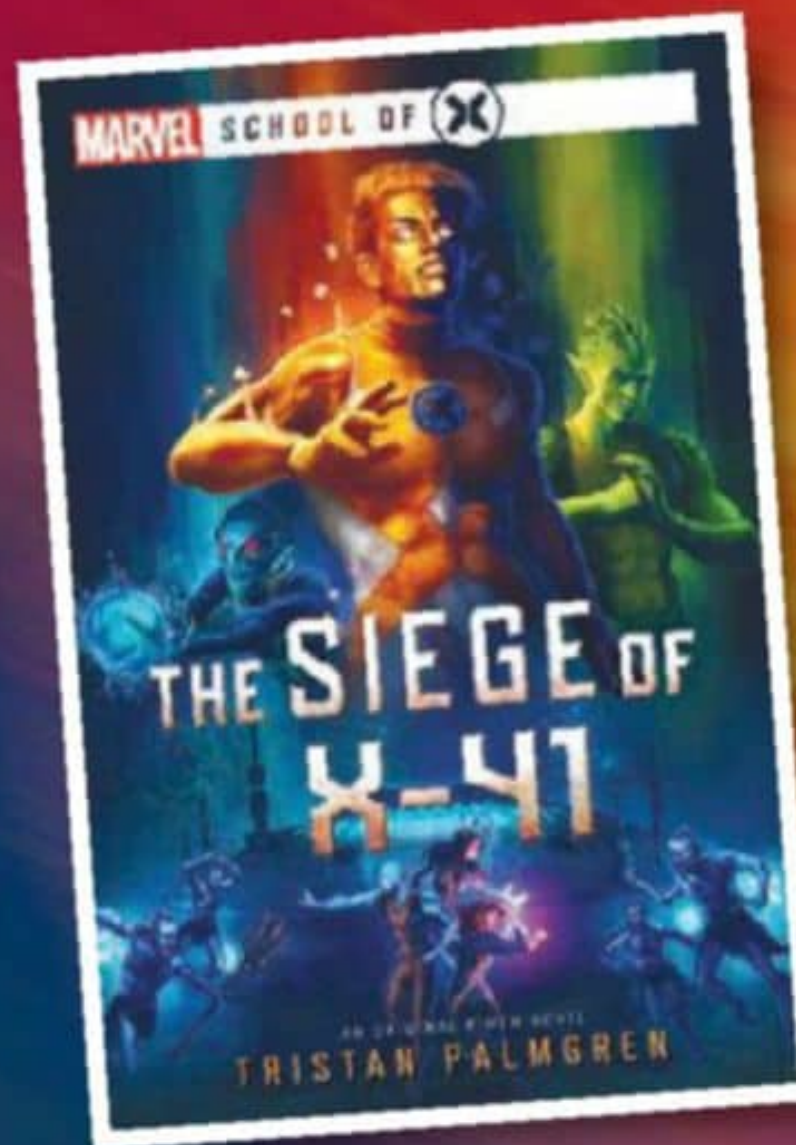


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HORROR OBSCURA

This issue, the morbid Martin Unsworth looks at the sad demise of a cult favourite.

is his sad demise. We'll get to that later, though. Let's pick through some of the highlights of Adamson's filmography to find the gems that you should seek out.

Born into a family of actors - his father was silent movie star Victor Adamson (who was often billed as Denver Dixon in low budget westerns) and his mother was Dolores Booth - it was almost inevitable that Al would get into the business. After appearing in a couple of his father's films as a youngster, it wouldn't be until the sixties that Adamson caught the movie bug full-time. After co-directing *Half Way to Hell* (1961), albeit uncredited, with his father, Adamson Snr introduced Al to the producer Sam Sherman, who would also go on to write many films for Al.

Speaking about his career, Adamson would proclaim, "We put more on the screen for the amount of money spent than anyone else did". It's something that's debatable, but there's no doubt that Al's films were never dull. They were lurid and always exploited whatever cinematic craze was in vogue. He would often return to horror, but he also dabbled with biker films, kung fu, blaxploitation, and sexploitation, and he wasn't averse to adding scenes to other movies and then releasing them as his own. Across his filmmaking career, he'd cross paths with horror actors on their descent - such as John Carradine and Lon Chaney, Jr - an infamous, murderous cult leader, a future resident of *Twin Peaks*, and a fast-food legend. Adamson's films certainly have something for everyone providing they are open to some crazy times. It's hard to think how these

low-budget filmmakers managed to get such big horror stars to appear in their 'little' movies, particularly when we see the reverence they are shown today. However, the days of fandom and conventions hadn't really arrived and these people who were once big box office stars were often in dire straits (not the band, obviously). John Carradine, for example, was an alcoholic and was prone to falling asleep on set (something he famously did in *House of the Long Shadows* when he teamed up with Peter Cushing, Christopher Lee, and Vincent Price for the first and only time) and Lon Chaney Jr had a similar problem amongst other ailments. The latter was paid enough to buy himself health insurance for three years, which is tragic but Adamson (and other indie filmmakers) gave these legends a chance to earn and keep some self-respect. However, some people might question that after seeing the films in question!

Al's first proper directing gig was *Echo of Terror*, which didn't impress distributors as there was nothing really to exploit. So, capitalising on the current fad, they included some dancing girls to produce *Psycho-A-Go-Go*. It was still a run-of-the-mill crime thriller until Adamson added newly filmed footage featuring Carradine, re-edited it all together and called it *The Fiend with the Electronic Brain*. Thinking things could be improved further, more new material was added with B-movie actors Kent Taylor and Tommy Kirk. The result was *The Blood of Ghastly Horror* (1971). Sam Sherman later joked that "It was the biggest mishmash on the planet".

Another film that took a transformation before being released was *Hell's Bloody Devils* (1970). When the movie started filming in 1967, it was under the title *Operation M* and was more of a spy thriller. Even a title change - to *The*

The Strange Case of Al Adamson

While we often celebrate forgotten films and obscure treats, not every movie has to be a 'classic' or highly regarded. In fact, as fans of exploitation and cult cinema, we're more likely to love a picture that's riddled with flaws than something that's cost \$50 million. In that spirit, we look at filmmaker Al Adamson. He was a prolific director who worked from the mid-sixties to the early eighties, and his output is often - affectionately - referred to as trash. His movies have a loyal cult following, however, and are entertaining, which is all we require from our viewing at the end of the day. What makes Adamson's story different, unfortunately,





Fakers - couldn't help the picture find distribution. So Al went back to the film and, seeing the success of *Easy Rider*, decided to film some new footage of a biker gang. Being as frugal as he was, Al made a deal with the one and only Colonel Harland Sanders. In exchange for feeding the crew, the characters would be seen eating the finger-licking chicken on screen. Sanders himself would make an appearance on screen too. It wasn't the first time the crafty Colonel made such a deal for a neat piece of product placement. In 1967, he appeared hawking his fried goodness in Herschell Gordon Lewis' *Blast-Off Girls*.

One of the stars of the original *West Side Story* (1961) had a major role in several Adamson films, including *Satan's Sadists* (1969) and *The Female Bunch* (1969). Russ Tamblyn had been the leader of the Jets gang in Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins' Oscar-winning film and had played the title role in George Pal's *Tom Thumb* (1958) before becoming Doctor Jacoby in *Twin Peaks*. For *Satan's Sadists*, Tamblyn played the leader of a biker gang. The film is full of fistfights, riding, and non-stop action. All on a shoestring budget, of course. One of the actors, John Cardos, owned a plane and would take the cameraman up with him to get aerial shots and perform other mad stunts. It was on *Satan's Sadists* that Al met his wife, Regina Carroll. To paraphrase The Human League, she was working as a waitress in a coffee shop when they met. The story goes that she spilt some coffee in the director's lap. She would go on to appear in many more of Al's films.

Chaney returned as a mad scientist's assistant in *Dracula vs Frankenstein* (filmed in 1969 under the title *The Blood Seekers* but not released until 1971). His boss was another actor from the golden age of Hollywood, J. Carroll Naish. He had some horror credentials as he was Boris Karloff's hunchbacked subordinate Daniel in *House of Frankenstein* (1944). As well as Chaney's health problems - which included a rasping speaking voice due to throat cancer and insisting on going to the set with his flask of 'tea', which was straight vodka - they had to contend with Naish. When they hired him, they didn't realise he was in a wheelchair. That's easily solved, he doesn't have to walk about in his scenes! Then he couldn't remember his lines, so large cue cards were held up just off-camera. Add this to the fact that he only had one eye. So when you watch the film, you see one eye looking blankly into space while the other darts from left-to-right reading the dialogue. To top all that, a clicking kept being heard on the soundtrack. It was his loose

HORROR OBSCURA



false teeth! Another familiar face in the film is Angelo Rossito, who was known for appearing with Lon Chaney Snr and John Barrymore in silent films, but is most famous for his appearance in Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932).

At only 2 foot 11 inches, he made an unforgettable impression. Playing the role of Count Dracula was Al's stockbroker, Roger Engel. However, they ended up giving him a creepier name for the credits, Zandor Vorkov. For the big confrontation scene hinted at in the title, there wasn't a regular makeup artist as it was filmed in New York rather than Hollywood. He had to use regular clown white, so his face looked more like a circus performer or a member of KISS, and he wore plastic fangs that you could buy at any joke shop. The movie also featured an appearance by Forrest J. Ackerman, which meant it got a fantastic feature in *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazine.

In *The Female Bunch*, Tamblyn plays an unfortunate chap who gets in the way of a bad-ass group of women who love terrorising small western towns.

It's perhaps prescient that some of the shooting took place at Spahn Ranch, a dedicated movie lot for westerns. At the time of filming, it was home to Charles Manson and his 'family'. Al recalled one day, Manson appeared on the set and "started ogling the girls". He demanded that he be removed and John Cardos physically took him off the set. A week later, Manson and his gang were arrested in the desert for the horrendous slaughter that took place at Cielo Drive. Sadly, *The Female Bunch* would be Lon Chaney's final film. He died in 1973.

Al built up a group of regulars that would always be happy to work on his shoestring budget. Along with Sam Sherman, he formed Independent-International Pictures so they didn't have to worry about distribution. Being in charge of that side of things meant they could capitalise on cinematic trends by re-releasing their films under different titles. Of course, this would mean that people would rock up to the cinema or the drive-in and realise mid-way through the film that they'd already seen it! Take, for example, *Blazing Stewardesses*

available as Larry was too ill). The title made it appear to be a follow-up to Al's *The Naughty Stewardesses* (which was IIP's highest grossing film), and was an attempt to cash in on *Blazing Saddles*. Because there was a truck hijack in it, after the success of *Convoy*, the film was re-released as *The Great Truck Robbery*, and later in the early eighties, when *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* was a hit, Sherman put the movie out again as *Cathouse Cowgirls*.

Not everyone who worked on Al's pictures was washed up or talentless. Among his regular cinematographers were Gary Graver, who regularly worked with Orson Welles during his documentary phase in the early seventies, and Vilmos Zsigmond, who would go on to shoot some of the most successful and revered films in cinema such as *Deliverance* (1972), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), several Robert Altman movies, and won an Academy Award for *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). In the same year that he was nominated for a BAFTA for Altman's *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, he worked with Al shooting additional footage for *Horror of the Blood Monsters*. This was one of the films that were 'spruced-up' by Al. A 1956 black and white Filipino dinosaur film entitled *Tagani* was taken and Al turned it into a story of an intergalactic space adventure. The monochrome footage was passed off as being on an alien world by using coloured filters for different scenes. In true ballyhoo spirit, this was labelled 'Spectrum X'.

Another film that was given the Adamson treatment was *Lucifer's Women*, made in 1974 by Paul Aratow (who would go on to be a producer on 1984's *Sheena* starring Tanya Roberts). New footage with the old, reliable John Carradine was included and released in 1978 as *Doctor Dracula*.

One of Al's last films was *Carnival Magic* in 1983. Its main focus was a talking chimpanzee named Alex. According to



(1975). This was a western air stewardess sex comedy starring Yvonne De Carlo (Lilly Munster!) and two of the remaining three Ritz Brothers (who were a vaudeville act who hadn't worked in pictures since the forties but were the next best thing to the two Howard brothers, who were all that was left of the Three Stooges, but weren't



people who worked on the film, the chimp speaking was not part of the original script or production! Following the death of his wife, Regina, Al didn't do much, but there was a project that he ended up working on for Sam Sherman, which was meant to be a documentary about UFOs. Adamson and a new starlet Stevee Ashlock went to Australia and Italy to film segments. Al went from a non-believer to being deep into the idea of UFOs. According to Stevee, he had a meeting with 'a being' that claimed to be half-alien and half-human and had documentation to prove so. Sherman was worried that Al was getting too deep into things and since it was already over budget, the production was shut down. Sherman claims there is enough footage to make three films.

When Adamson retired from filmmaking in the '80s, he moved into real estate and was arguably much more successful. He would write the occasional script, and one featured a story that would become grimly prescient. The full story of Al's final days is told in detail in the superb documentary *Blood & Flesh: The Reel Life & Ghastly Death of Al Adamson*, directed by David Gregory. A co-founder of Severin Films, Gregory also helmed the documentary *Lost Soul: The Doomed Journey of Richard Stanley's Island of Dr Moreau*, which is about the *Color Out of Space* director's awful experience attempting to film the H.G. Wells remake. We'll attempt to give a potted version of what happened, but we recommend the documentary for a more detailed account.

Adamson had hired a handyman, Fred Fulford, to do some jobs on his house prior to selling it. He had handed over his credit card so he could pay for supplies, but Fulford took advantage and took a card out on Al's account in his own name. There were a few altercations between Al and Fulford, and subsequently, the director went missing. Fulford told everyone that Adamson had gone to Florida, but Al's

housekeeper became suspicious when Fulford had removed a hot tub during the time Al wasn't there. Five weeks after Adamson's last known appearance, police dug beneath the tiles and concrete at the place where the hot tub had been. They discovered the body of the director. Fulford was arrested and was eventually sentenced to 25 years to life in prison. Al's tragic end was big news for newspapers and TV shows that revelled in salacious stories. In death, Adamson had become more well-known than he had done for his movies.

"Fulford told everyone that Adamson had gone to Florida"

The aforementioned documentary manages to secure an interview with Fulford. We asked David Gregory how this came about. *"It was difficult, we were actually well into post-production when we got that phone interview with the murderer, and we had actually debated whether we should even approach him and involve him,"* Gregory told us. *"I'd read all the court transcripts and all the articles in the media at the time. There was a pretty cut and dried case. It wasn't like I was going to go in and do this investigative documentary and find out that he was innocent".*

People would still be curious, obviously, and it was this element that encouraged the team to at least try to talk to Fulford.



Producer - Sam Sherman

"We had to find out what the rules are with getting an incarcerated person into a documentary, and in California, you can't take cameras into prisons and interview inmates. Technically, you shouldn't be interviewing them at all. But there are ways to do it that aren't really particularly policed. And in this case, it was because they were allowed phone calls. So basically, all we had to do was record a phone call. We'd have to gain Fred's trust, so to speak."

Gregory continues, *"It was my co-producer, Heather Buckley, who managed to do that. She became his pen pal for a while, receiving these strange rambling letters from him about how he's innocent, you should look into these other people. Not actually explaining how he had cement on his hands, and that he'd admitted being the guy who filled in the Jacuzzi. She called him twice. The first time she said 'do you mind that we're recording this?' and he said he did mind, and he wanted to talk to her again about his innocence. But the next time, he agreed and had a person sitting with him to make sure he was answering things correctly. He didn't really give much in terms of detail when she asked, other than 'he was railroaded by the courts and the judge didn't like him because he looked at his girlfriend funny' and stuff like that. Across an hour of recording we had two minutes of usable stuff".*

Listening to the recording is sobering and, alongside the first-hand testimony that the documentary has from the housekeeper and Al's brother, is upsetting and disturbing. It's a fascinating watch, however, and highly recommended even though Adamson's films won't be for everyone. There are plenty of us who love these kinds of movies, though. As Al himself said, *"We're not shooting for Academy Awards when we make these pictures, we're shooting to entertain the audience".* One way or another, they do. ✨

A History of (Ultra) VIOLENCE

SHIN ULTRAMAN is the latest in a long line of movies, TV shows, anime, manga, and more to feature the alien hero. From his first arrival on Earth in 1966 to the most recent re-imagining, **ULTRAMAN** has captured the hearts and minds of fans across the universe. But just where did he come from...? *by Alan Boon*

Scripted by *Neon Genesis Evangelion* creator Hideaki Anno, *Shin Ultraman* takes the core of the traditional Ultraman origin and puts modern meat on the bones. Japan is still under the threat of giant monsters – or *kaijū* – classified as S-Class incursions, and this leads to the establishment of the S-Class Species Suppression Protocol. A dedicated team ensure that as little harm as possible is done by the monstrous creatures, but during one S-Class incident, a giant, silver humanoid appears from the sky to defeat the *kaijū*. During the attack, an SSSP staffer named Shinji Kaminaga is badly hurt and, when the next S-Class threat appears, finds that the alien saviour has bonded with him in order to remain on Earth. Shinji receives a device known as the Beta Capsule, which enables him to transform into Ultraman and help keep Earth safe from monsters.

Anno had been contracted by Takayuki Tsukakoshi, the incoming

head of Tsuburaya Productions, to produce a trilogy of new Ultraman features along the lines of the recently completed *Shin Godzilla*, which Anno had co-directed with Shinji Higuchi. Anno completed his outline for the trilogy and the script for the first film by February 2019, by which time Tsukakoshi had departed the company. Production was put on the back burner due to Anno's involvement in *Evangelion: 3.0+1.0 Thrice Upon a Time* but work on *Shin Ultraman* began in August 2019, with Higuchi behind the camera and a planned release date of summer 2021. That was pushed back to spring 2022 when COVID-19 caused an almost total shutdown of Japanese society, but the film took \$34 million on its eventual release, over four times its budget. *Shin Ultraman* was accompanied by *Shin Ultra Fight*, a web series featuring newly shot footage alongside clips from the film, and forms part of a loose *Shin* universe with *Shin Godzilla*, *Evangelion: 3.0+1.0*, and the upcoming *Shin Kamen Rider*.

It's a far cry from Ultraman's humble beginnings, spinning out of *Ultra Q*, a January 1966 show that had been intended by Eiji Tsuburaya to be a Japanese version of *The Twilight Zone*. Tsuburaya had cut his teeth as a cameraman for Japanese cinema pioneer Yoshirō Edamasa and began to develop innovative techniques to capture shots, becoming fascinated with special effects after seeing RKO Pictures' *King Kong* in 1933. In 1938, he became head of Special Visual Techniques at the Tōhō studio but he soon left to work for the Japanese government during the Second World War, for whom he made a number of outright propaganda films. His work on such projects hindered his chances of finding work in post-war Japan and so he set up his own company, Tsuburaya Visual Effects Research, until Tōhō took him back in house in the early 1950s.

It was while Tsuburaya was back at Tōhō that he became involved in the ambitious new project which became *Godzilla*. Together with



director Ishirō Honda and producer Tomoyuki Tanaka, he became known as one of The Golden Trio, winning an award for developing the rubber suit technique used to create the effect of a rampaging force of nature destroying Japanese cities. *Godzilla* sparked a rush of movies in what soon became known as the *tokusatsu* (literally, 'special effects') genre, many of which had Tsuburaya's personal stamp on them, especially after the establishment in 1960 of the Special Effects Filming Pool, a department that produced special effects for Tōhō until its demolition in the mid-2000s.

In 1963, Tsuburaya left Tōhō to establish his own production company, working towards the creation of *Ultra Q*, which was originally titled *UNBALANCE* until the popularity of *Ultra-C*, a technique developed by the Japanese gymnastics team which was used to win Gold at the 1964 Olympics in Tōkyō. Tsuburaya sold *Ultra Q* – the Q stood for 'Question' – to the TBS channel and they insisted on some changes to make it more family-friendly, wanting Tsuburaya to use the *tokusatsu* techniques that had made him famous, and so the show became a creature of the week affair, with cases investigated by a trio of investigators. Shown as part of the Takeda Hour, sponsored by a pharmaceuticals company, *Ultra Q* was a hit with viewers, with up to thirty percent of total viewers tuning in to TBS on Sundays at 7pm, and it wasn't long before TBS contracted Tsuburaya to produce a follow-up series...

Tsuburaya had already been working on his next project, which took the bare bones of the *Ultra Q* premise. He fleshed out his trio of *ad hoc* researchers into the Scientific Investigation Agency, a specially created government department tasked with finding and neutralising alien threats. Headed up by Captain Muramatsu, the SIA would find themselves aided in their missions by a giant hero named Bemler, who was secretly SIA agent

Sakomizu. Only Muramatsu knew his secret and, with the help of Bemler's fantastic abilities, the SIA would defend Earth on a weekly basis. *Bemler: Scientific Investigation Agency* went into production in December 1965 but underwent a name change to *Redman* – reflecting the colour of the hero's costume, notable because that indicated that the show would not be made in black and white – and included the twist that Redman was actually an alien who bonded to earthman Sakomizu for the first time.

In March 1966, with *Ultra Q* doing gangbusters ratings for TBS, Tsuburaya registered *Ultraman* with the Japanese copyright office and input from the network led to cast changes, with more female representation and actors chosen for their more Western appearance to sell the show overseas. Tsuburaya also changed the look of the main character, away from the firebird-influenced early designs to the sleeker, more attractive version we know today. Changes made, *Ultraman* debuted on July 17th 1966, running for thirty-nine weekly episodes. The new host for the alien hero was now Shin Hayata, played by Tōhō bit-part actor Susumu Kurobe, with Bin Furuya uncredited as Ultraman himself. Hayata was a member of the renamed Science Patrol, answering to Captain Muramatsu, who also counted comedic inventor Ide among his team of special agents.

Ultraman became another massive success



for Tsuburaya and TBS, with US rights sold to United Artists in September 1966, who re-dubbed the dialogue into English and sold the show into syndication. *Ultraman* became a cultural phenomenon, with merchandise featuring the title character and his enemies selling by the bucket-load, and TBS – which also counted the Tōei-produced *Captain Ultra* and an imported *Lost in Space* among its hit shows – ordered another instalment of the series, 1967's *Ultraseven*.

This time out, the titular alien was really Dan Moroboshi (played by Kōji Moritsugu), aided by the six members of Ultra Garrison, each driving a fantastic vehicle (replicas of which could, of course, be sold in toyshops). A hybrid of *Ultraman* and *Thunderbirds*, *Ultraseven's* monsters were produced from capsules and were cited as a direct inspiration by Pokémon creator Satoshi Tajiri. Ratings for *Ultraseven* reflected a general trend away from tokusatsu productions towards supernatural-flavoured shows, and despite ten extra episodes taking the full run to forty-nine weeks, TBS asked Tsuburaya to provide a new show more in keeping with the new fashion.

Mysterious Operation arrived in September 1968 but it wouldn't be long before Japanese

tastes swung back around again and Tsuburaya returned to their most famous creation.

1971's *Kaettekita Ultraman* (or *Return of Ultraman*) opens with the death of young racecar driver Hideki Gō (Jirō Dan), killed while trying to rescue a child from the rampage of two battling kaijū. Gō's sacrifice is witnessed by Ultraman Jack, the latest in the line of alien heroes seeking to aid Earth and so named to avoid confusion with the earlier version, and he bonds his life force with Gō to resurrect him. Gō joins the Monster Attack Team, a new force established to fight the returning monsters, and fifty-one episodes were aired on Friday nights from April 1971. Tsuburaya had intended *Ultraseven* to be the final chapter in the story, but the merchandise sales continued to be strong even after the show went off the air and the commercial opportunity was too good to ignore, despite Eiji Tsuburaya's passing before the new project was greenlit.

Tsuburaya's son Noboru used the new show to confirm that both *Ultraman* and *Ultraseven* took place in the same world as

this new incarnation, establishing that there was a race of beings dedicated to intergalactic harmony. *Return of Ultraman* was followed by *Ultraman Ace*

(1972), *Ultraman Tarō* (1973), and *Ultraman Leo* (1974), with the series once again coming to an end following the final *Leo* episode in March 1975. The main writer on that series later revealed that the decision to end the series had been taken before *Leo* began airing, the feeling from both Tsuburaya and TBS that they couldn't top the quality of *Tarō*.

By this point, the *Ultraman* series had competition in the form of *Kamen Rider* (or 'masked rider'), created for television and manga by artist Shōtarō Ishinomori and airing from 1971 on rival station MBS. Like *Captain Ultra*, *Kamen Rider* was a product of the Tōei Company, who had been producing tokusatsu movies and TV since 1958's *Moonlight Mask*. In 1975, they engaged Ishinomori to produce another show, this time

featuring a group of young protagonists. The resulting *Himitsu Sentai Gorenjā* (or *Secret Squad Gorenger*) was every bit the sensation

that *Ultraman* had been, sparking a long-running series of *Super Sentai* shows that would eventually reach the US and beyond as *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*.

While the *Ultraman* series was dormant, Tsuburaya continued to provide TV shows for TBS, TV Asahi, and other Japanese networks, but came back to their most famous creation in April 1979 with *The Ultraman*, the first in the series to be animated rather than use tokusatsu techniques and not considered to be in canon with the earlier shows. The continued success of the *Super Sentai* series provoked

"Ultraman will soon celebrate his sixtieth birthday, a longevity only enjoyed by a handful of superheroes in the US!"





another attempt at tokusatsu with *Ultraman 80* but the series was riven with disputes between Tsuburaya Productions and TBS, leading to a breakdown of relations between the two. This meant that no new Ultraman content was produced in Japan until 1996, although Tsuburaya did partner with Hanna-Barbera to produce an animated show for US audiences that aired as part of the fall 1987 season, and there were also two animated movies in the early 1990s. Meanwhile, Ultraman's cultural currency remained strong, with toys still popular and several professional wrestlers adopting either the Ultraman or Ultraseven identities in both Japan and México.

In 1993, Tsuburaya and Tōei partnered to produce a tokusatsu *Ultraman vs Kamen Rider* feature, released straight to video and sparking a revival of the series. *Ultraman Tiga* arrived in 1996 to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the character's debut, a fifty-two-episode weekly series on Saturdays on TBS. Set ten years in the future and considered to be a reboot rather than a sequel, Tiga saw the titular Ultraman working with GUTS, the Earth Peace Union, and

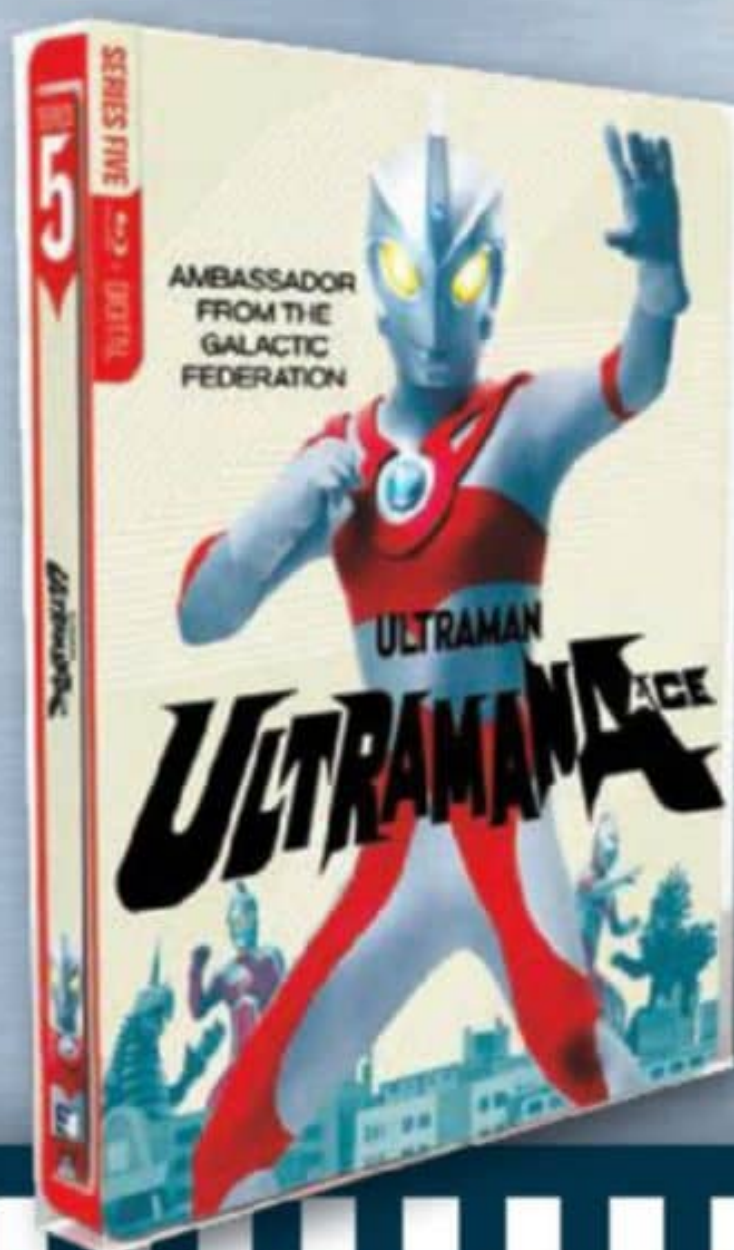
began the first in what is now referred to as the Heisei Trilogy, with *Dyna* and *Gaia* following on from *Tiga* as one complete run through to August 1999. Since that time, and in common with the *Super Sentai* series that renews itself every year in order to sell new toys through its commercial partners, there has rarely been a time when there hasn't been an Ultraman TV show in production, with 2023's *Ultraman: New Generation Stars* becoming the fortieth TV show to feature characters from the series, as well as a slew of associated projects released to video, DVD, and streaming services.

In three years' time, Ultraman will celebrate his *sixtieth* birthday, a longevity only enjoyed by a handful of superheroes in the US, and he has made in-roads into their traditional territory with a series of comic books published by Marvel Comics since 2020. Written by Kyle Higgins and Matt Groom, who both worked on *Mighty*

Morphin Power Rangers titles from Boom! Studios, the Marvel Ultraman miniseries, followed by sequel runs *The Trials of Ultraman* and *The Mystery of Ultraseven*, and Groom has revealed that there will be a crossover series with Marvel Universe characters in 2023. A series of Pop Vinyl figures is also available from Funko and those in search of more articulated action figures are well-served by a range from Bandai's SH Figuarts arm.

The success of *Shin Ultraman*, despite criticism that it is not as reproachful of the Japanese government as *Shin Godzilla* had been, will ensure that Ultraman continues to be one of the most recognisable and beloved characters in sci-fi superheroics, able to cut through to an audience of all ages, unlike the kid-focused *Power Rangers* franchise. Cited as an influence by creators like Peyton 'Ant-Man' Reed and *Resident Evil* creator Hideki Kamiya, Eiji Tsuburaya's creation taps into something primal; as much fun as it is to see Godzilla destroy cities and burn fools, there's always a part of us that would like to go toe to toe with the King of Monsters. Sure, we may not all look as flattering in such a skintight bodysuit, but we'd all love to go ultra!

SHIN ULTRAMAN is released to rent/buy on digital this Spring.



telephemera

We're pretty loose with the definition of *Telephemera* here at STARBURST and, given we made that word up, we have every right to be. The root of telephemera is, of course, *ephemera* and that word is itself derived from the Greek *ephemeros*, meaning 'lasting for a day'. Many of the shows featured in this column would struggle to reach twenty-four hours of total running time, but what about a show that lasted for just *eleven minutes* in October of 2014? This is the story of...

one where Fred Flintstone has his Cartoon Network parking space stolen by Speed Racer, and this led to more work, including episodes of *Harvey Birdman, Attorney at Law* and *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, as well as more shorts for the likes of *Cartoon Cartoon Fridays* and *Sunday Pants*.

One of the projects he'd worked on for Cartoon Network was *Night of the Living Doo*, a Halloween special that saw the Mystery Machine gang thwarted in their attempts to stop and investigate spooky goings-on by an over-helpful Gary Coleman before landing up at a haunted castle owned by David Cross. This is where zombies, Jabberjaw, and the swing band Big Bad Voodoo Daddy become involved in the story. Kelly wrote *Night of the Living Doo* with Jeffrey G Olsen, a fellow employee of the On Air Department, and the two decided to pitch their own show, which was taken on as a project by the Williams Street studios that handled much of [adult swim]'s output.

Kelly and Olsen were transferred across the street to the Williams Street headquarters and began work on *Stroker & Hoop*, a parody of 1970s cop dramas, and particularly *Starsky & Hutch*. Premiering in October 2004, the show featured Jon Glaser as Stroker, Speed Levitch as Hoop, and Paul Christie as their talking car, CARR. Over the first season's thirteen episodes, the pair encountered ninjas, voodoo, Lou Diamond Phillips, and all kinds of bizarre situations, and Episode Thirteen ended on a cliffhanger which apparently killed off the entire cast. The second season would have found them initially in the afterlife, but the show was cancelled, and Olsen moved on to become creative director of adultswim.com.

Kelly, meanwhile, began working on a script for a short comedy set in Hell, where thousands of years of unlimited access to virgins and all the cotton candy they could ask for has

left two guys utterly bored. He took it to *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* co-creator Dave Willis, who put his own flavour into the premise, including the addition of a Satan character. The pair began joking about what it must be like to be the Devil, and that gave birth to the first incarnation of *Your Pretty Face is Going to Hell* (named after a song by The Stooges) in 2011.



The two took *Your Pretty Face* forward to a series in 2013, depicting the ongoing misfortunes of an incompetent employee in the eleventh circle of Hell. The regular series ran for four seasons over six years, and a total of forty-two episodes. It was notable as Kelly's first full live-action work, although he had been mixing live-action and animation from his earliest days at Cartoon Network and had produced some



Chris 'Casper' Kelly was drawing comic strips and looking to break into writing comedy for TV when old college friend John Altschuler recommended him for a gig on *CatDog*, a new Nickelodeon show that would run for seven successful seasons on that network. Kelly was paired with Canadian writer John Bolton and the duo supplied two scripts for the show's first season – 'Squirrel Dog' and 'Work Force' – and fought a constant battle with the producers to slip more adult and irreverent references into the episodes.



At the same time, Kelly was submitting his résumé to other companies and was hired as a staff writer by Cartoon Network, where he started work writing advertising bumpers for their most popular shows. With the encouragement of creative director Michael Ouweleen, Kelly wrote some short cartoons featuring classic Hanna-Barbera characters, including

ALAN BOON DELVES INTO THE TELEVISION ARCHIVES TO UNEARTH ANOTHER LONG-FORGOTTEN CURIO...

independent short films, including 2011's *Please Please Pick Up*.

While developing *Your Pretty Face*, Kelly worked with creative consultant Nick Gibbons, and it was to Gibbons that he pitched his next idea. Kelly had been watching old sitcoms and was taken with their almost identical opening titles, which featured a parade of people smiling for the camera. Wondering what would happen if you extended a typical example to an uncomfortable length, Kelly thought it would be perfect for the 4am slot occupied by *Infomercials*, an irregular series of parody films that had grown beyond the initial 'bad ad' concept. Gibbons loved the idea and pitched it to [adult swim] head Mike Lazzo at a party. Lazzo immediately gave Kelly the green light and *Too Many Cooks* was in pre-production.

Kelly recruited a team to help him work out just how he was going to make this thing last for long enough to fill the *Infomercials* slot of fifteen minutes, with producers Brandon Betts, Tom Holley, and Alex Orr joining editor Paul Painter to make up the core of the crew. Painter was crucial and the two



batted ideas back and forth for almost a year until they began shooting in October 2013. Kelly and Painter put together a procession of parodies, initially of 1970s and 1980s sitcoms (the *Too Many Cooks* font is directly lifted from *Full House*), widening to include 1990s shows like *Seinfeld*, and then even to sci-fi, crime, soap opera, and even animated shows, with *Battlestar Galactica*, *Law & Order*, and *G.I. Joe* all receiving the *Too Many Cooks* treatment.

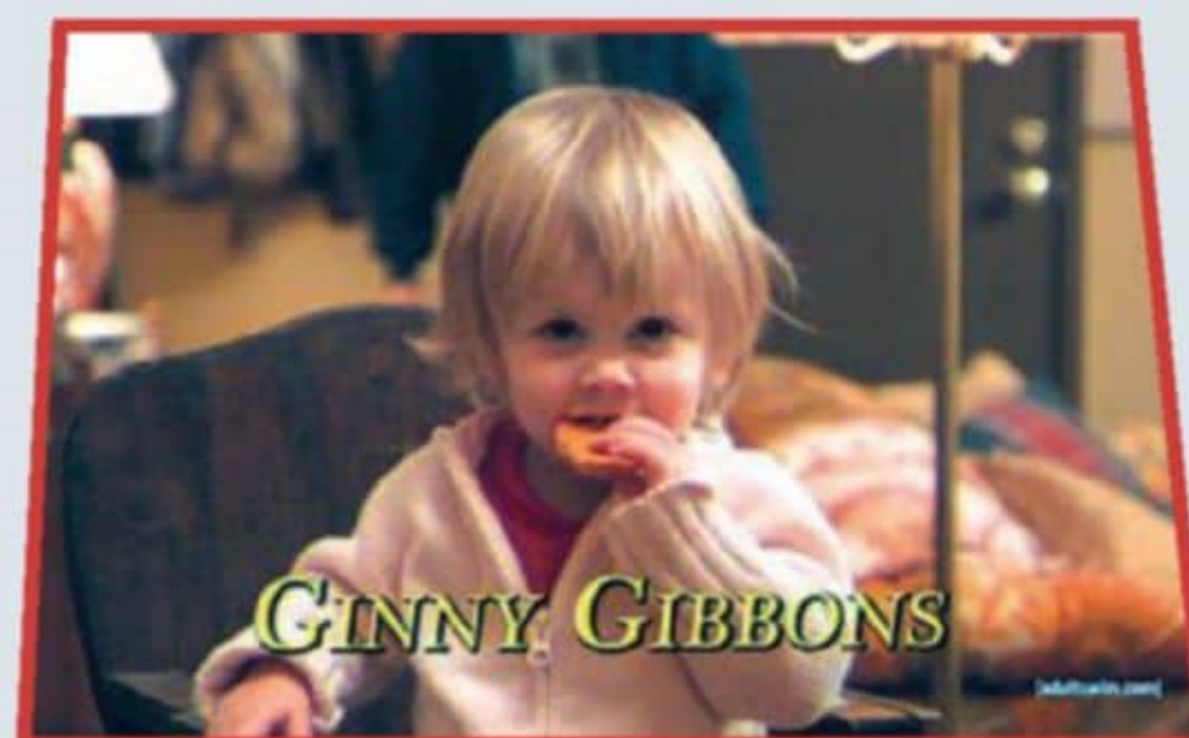
It was filmed over three days, with a cast recruited from Atlanta's movie and TV extra community who were



only given a rough script and guided through Kelly's vision. A local improv group, Dad's Garage, were on hand to help with some of the trickier concepts, and the green room became a human zoo, each only aware of the small part they would play in the bigger picture. The casting note declared that the cast should have "interesting faces and look slightly off in the way an off-brand cola looks compared to Coke". Some had worked with Kelly before, including William Tokarsky; he had been cast as a demon on *Your Pretty Face is Going to Hell* because he had a receding hairline which would allow horns to be stuck on and was perfect for the role of The Killer, one of the few characters in the short not to be named Cook (or Cooke or Cookowski or...).

Painter had edited their test film of sitcom openings to stock music but the finished short needed a tailor-made theme song, as vital to the end product as any of the visuals. Kelly originally enlisted Michael Kohler, a Cartoon Network veteran who had worked on *Harvey Birdman*, *Stroker & Hoop*, and *Archer* (as well as providing the theme tune for CN's sister network Boomerang). Kohler nailed the initial sitcom brief but was unable to work in the genre shifts needed for the rest of the film. Kelly's second choice, *Squidbillies*' Shawn Coleman, was able to do that but couldn't quite capture the initial sitcom feel. In the end, Kelly combined the two and *Too Many Cooks*' signature theme was born.

Too Many Cooks aired at 4am on October 28th, 2014 and was repeated in that slot for a full week. Initially, there was little response, not unusual for a short that debuted while most sane people were asleep. It didn't go entirely unseen, though, and one of the people that saw it recorded it and uploaded it to YouTube. Available to watch on-demand, *Too Many Cooks* went viral almost instantly, earning five million views in a weekend, and [adult swim] wisely left it up on the original uploaders' page for a while before moving it to their own YouTube channel. It was covered by *Rolling Stone*, *BuzzFeed*, and *AV Club*, and filmmakers James Gunn and Rian Johnson (who opined that it should have been entered for consideration at the Oscars) shared the video on their social media.



While some of the cast reunited to present a limited-run stage musical in Atlanta, Kelly went back to working on *Your Pretty Face is Going to Hell* but was tapped by director Panos Cosmatos to produce a queasy, surreal, animated piece for his Nicolas Cage



psycho-thriller *Mandy*. Featuring the mac 'n' cheese mascot Cheddar Goblin (made by special effects maven Shane Morton, who also created Smarf for *Too Many Cooks*), the short sequence fits seamlessly into Cosmatos' dizzying and unsettling larger piece.



by *Danny Ketchup*, a parody of over-the-top action films which repurposed footage from *White Fire*, a legendarily bad 1984 French-American-Italian-Turkish production starring Robert Ginty. Kelly's remix – an excerpt from the fictional *American as Apple DIE!* – added cartoon heads, cleverly covered up nudity and (most of the) gore, and humorous dialogue from Williams Street regulars to ridiculous effect. Kelly's latest project was being kept closely under wraps but was rumoured to be a full movie. Sure enough, *The Fireplace* arrived in December 2022 under the pretence of being a two-hour Yule Log live-stream, with the ridiculousness building from

the first moments in front of that burning fire. It might not be the only thing we get in the next twelve months as *More Stories About Spaceships and Cancer*, his 2013 collection of short stories, has also been optioned by Netflix.

Whatever Casper Kelly does next, it's unlikely that it will have the same viral effect of *Too Many Cooks*, which spread like wildfire across the zeitgeist, even if few who saw it know the man behind it. His unusual creative outlook, though, skews anything he touches, throwing everything out of kilter; *Too Many Cooks* may be ephemeral but it leaves a not unpleasant aftertaste.

***TOO MANY COOKS* is available to watch on the official [Adult Swim] YouTube channel.**



Kelly was also working on another short film to be shown in the *Infomercials* slot, reuniting him with Nick Gibbons. *Final Deployment 4: Queen Battle Walkthrough* took the form of a YouTube or Twitch streaming walkthrough of a fictional game, eventually becoming something much bigger and much more meta. An avid gamer, Kelly speaks with a qualified voice – he and Gibbons watched over thirty YouTube streamers as part of their research – and once again it was a casual pitch to Mike Lazzo, this time at an Indian restaurant, that secured the deal and double the usual running time. *Final Deployment* aired in June 2018 and was followed in December 2020



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BY KEN WYNNE

HE WHO DARES, WINS

40 YEARS IN THE DRAGON'S LAIR

With **DRAGON'S LAIR** celebrating a milestone anniversary this year, we return to the arcade to re-examine the revolutionary video game series, its spiritual successor **SPACE ACE**, and creator **DON BLUTH**'s acclaimed legacy as the independent animator who took on Disney...



Developed by Advanced Microcomputer Systems (AMS) and released by Cinematronics (aka Starcom or Magicom) during the golden age of arcade video games, *Dragon's*

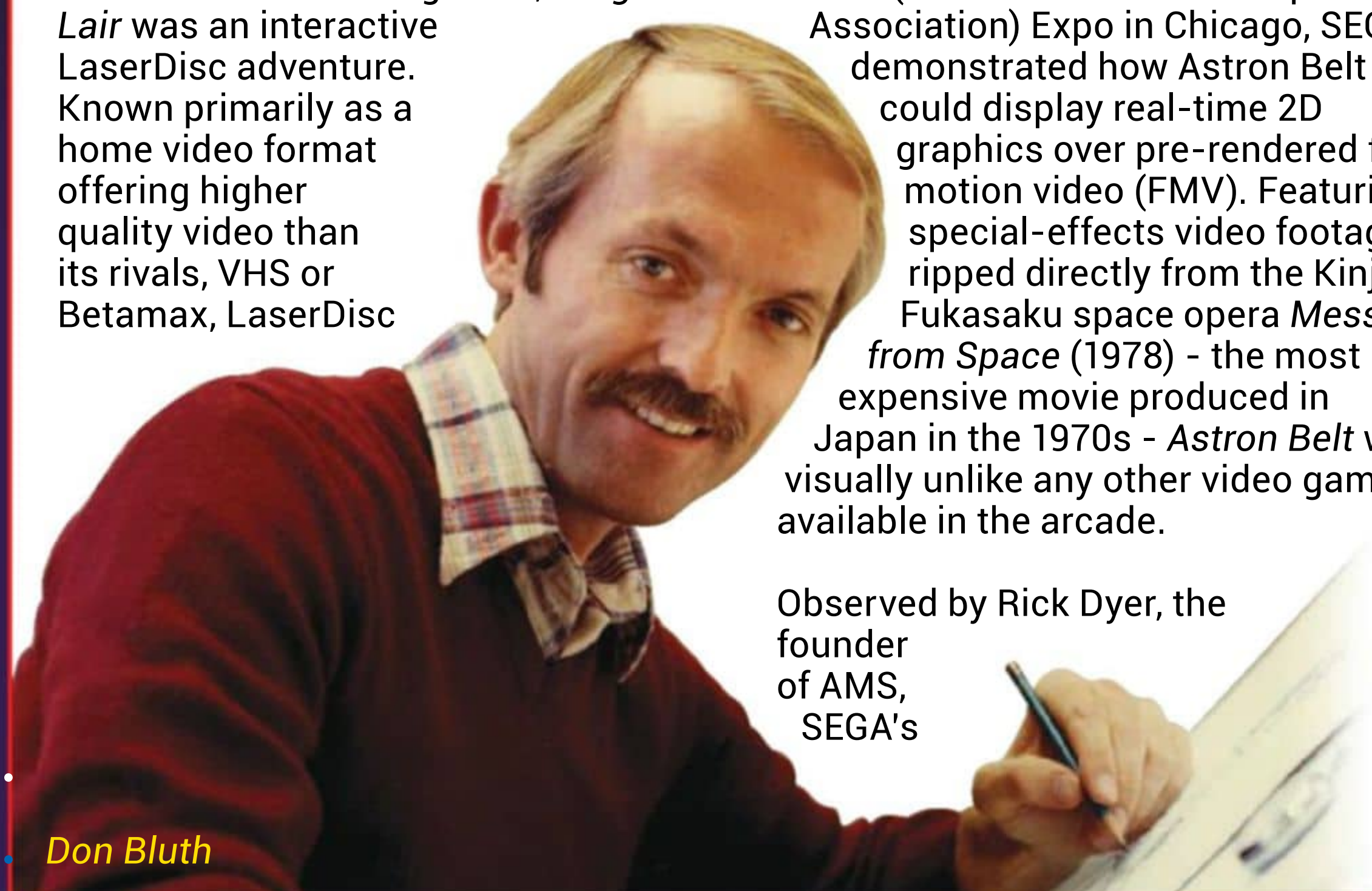
Lair was an interactive LaserDisc adventure. Known primarily as a home video format offering higher quality video than its rivals, VHS or Betamax, LaserDisc

allowed for additional storage previously unavailable for most arcade units. SEGA first saw the potential in this technology and incorporated it into the development of *Astron Belt*, a 1983 arcade shoot 'em up released initially in Japan. During the 1982 AMOA (Amusement & Music Operators Association) Expo in Chicago, SEGA demonstrated how *Astron Belt* could display real-time 2D graphics over pre-rendered full-motion video (FMV). Featuring special-effects video footage ripped directly from the Kinji Fukasaku space opera *Message from Space* (1978) - the most expensive movie produced in Japan in the 1970s - *Astron Belt* was visually unlike any other video game available in the arcade.

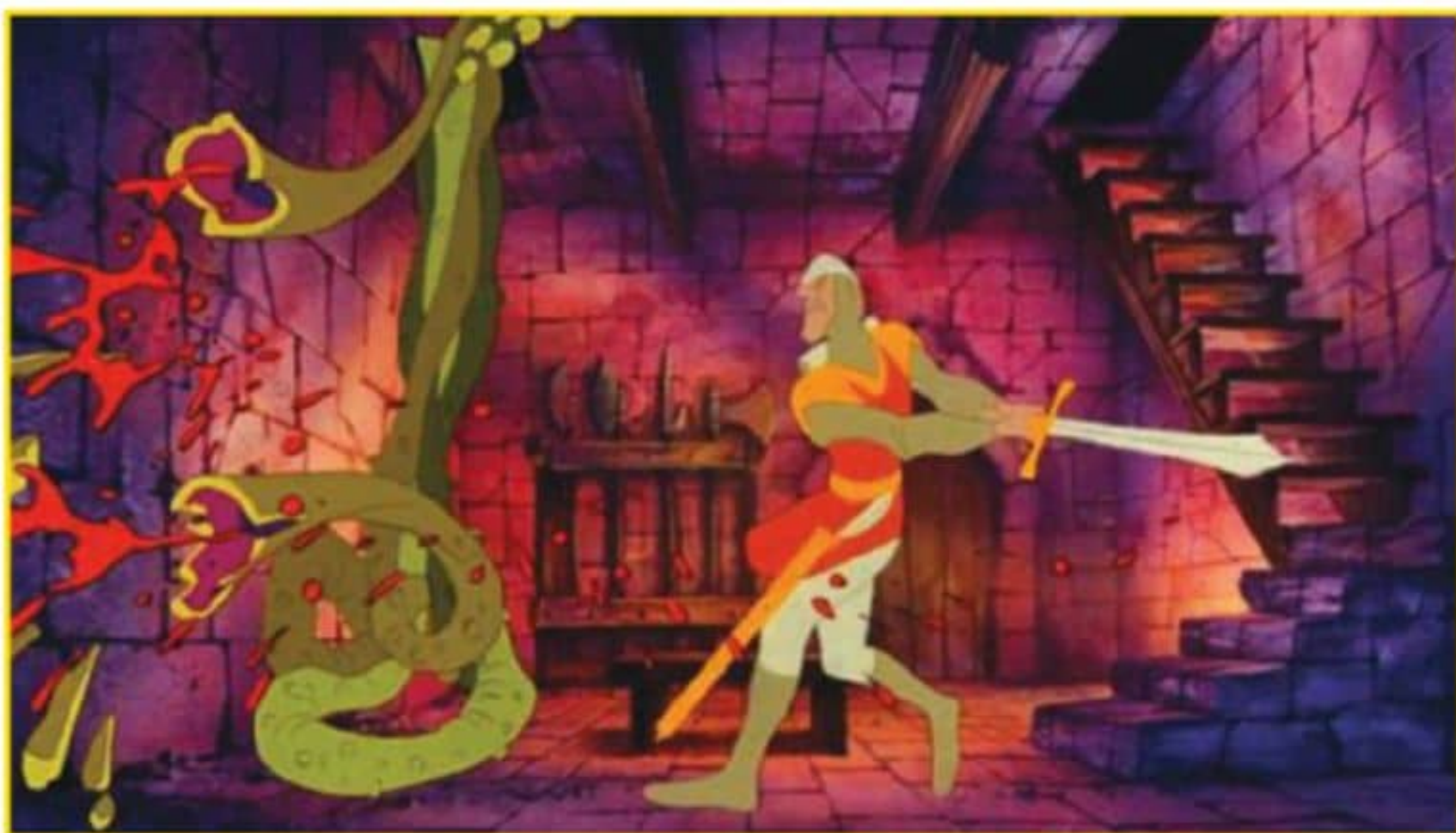
Observed by Rick Dyer, the founder of AMS, SEGA's

trade show demonstration convinced him to incorporate LaserDisc tech into developing their own coin-operated adventure, *The Secrets of the Lost Woods*, which was later known under the working title: *Dragon's Lair*. Further inspired by the 1976 text-based video game *Adventure* and the 1982 animated fantasy film *The Secret of NIMH* (based on Robert C. O'Brien's 1971 children's novel *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*), Dyer conceived the idea of what we now refer to as an interactive movie, a narrative driven by player interaction. If only Dyer could incorporate the Disney-esque visual quality of a film like *The Secret of NIMH* into *Dragon's Lair* like SEGA had done previously with *Message from Space* and *Astron Belt*...

Directed by Don Bluth, an ex-Walt Disney Productions animator who began working independently out of his own house and garage, *The Secret of NIMH* was the feature-length debut for Don Bluth Productions. Frustrated during his time at the 'House of Mouse', Bluth began working on an animated



Don Bluth



short film during the evenings and weekends. He invited other young animators like Gary Goldman and John Pomeroy to learn older techniques that were being abandoned at Disney to lower production costs. However, Bluth believed that the industry would only survive if traditional production methods continued and pitched the short, titled *Banjo the Woodpile Cat*, to Ron W. Miller, future Disney CEO and Walt Disney's son-in-law. "About four years into this, we wondered if we would ever recoup our investment of time and money," said Bluth.

Seeing no value in *Banjo*, Miller declined. In 1979, on his 42nd birthday, Bluth resigned from Walt Disney Productions along with Goldman, Pomeroy, and multiple other animators to form their rival studio, taking approximately 17% of Disney's animation department. Bluth would later say, "There is a sincere desire on the part of Disney to perpetuate the art of animation, but the studio wasn't teaching". Miller retorted that Bluth's resignation was "Like getting rid of a thorn," but it had left Disney with a cut! While Miller had to push back the release of *The Fox and the Hound* (1981) due to the number of defectors, Don Bluth Productions was expanding their team to 160 animators, having secured funding for *The Secret of NIMH* from outside investors who had seen value in *Banjo*. *The Secret of NIMH* was later met with critical acclaim and modest box office success upon its release, despite having a tighter budget and schedule than most Disney animated features.

It was one of animation's greatest rivalries: Bluth had worked for Disney as early as 1955 - providing assistance on *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) - later joining Filmation in the late 1960s to work on layouts for *The*

Archie Show and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, before returning to Disney in 1971 to work on the likes of *Robin Hood* (1973), *The Rescuers* (1977), and *Pete's Dragon* (1977). Bluth desired to preserve the animation techniques that Disney's core animators, known affectionately as the 'Nine Old Men', pioneered from the 1920s onwards. "We were actually very enthusiastic about working at Walt Disney Productions, almost obsessive about it," Goldman said. Working from Bluth's garage came not from any desire to leave Disney but as an opportunity for everyone to learn.

Don Bluth Productions - later known as Bluth Group - was set up to be Walt Disney Productions' direct competition. Disney had already begun production on *The Black Cauldron*, a dark fantasy intended to be generation-defining for the animation industry. It was Disney's first to incorporate computer-generated imagery (CGI) and its most

expensive animated feature. But the Bluth Group was about to take an even greater risk... and enter the dragon's lair! "Dyer had seen *The Secret of NIMH* in the theatre and decided then that we should be the team to do the animation," said Goldman. "His plan was for a three-way partnership, with his team doing pre-production and the computer programming. The Bluth Group was to do the actual production and Cinematronics to do the distribution."

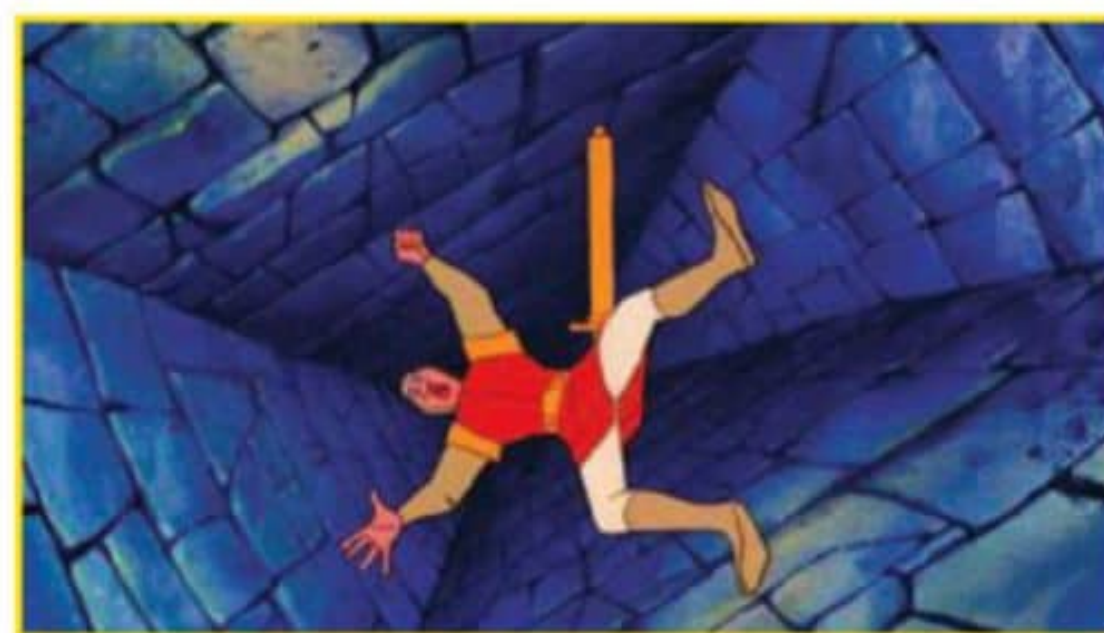
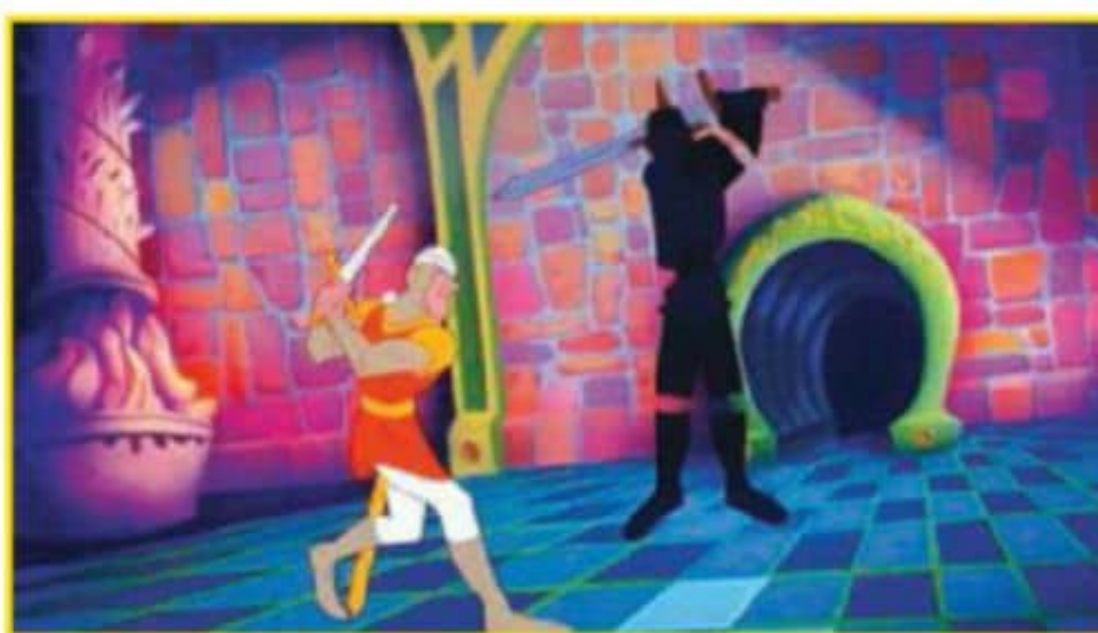
Discussing the concept of *Dragon's Lair* to Bluth, Goldman, and Pomeroy, Dyer explained how LaserDisc allowed for random disc access; therefore, it could show any scene in a variable order. The player would control Dirk the Daring, a reluctant hero, who must reach the dragon's lair



if he is to save the seductive Princess Daphne from the fire-breathing Singe. However, every obstacle would require the player to execute an action during a threat/resolve moment. Bluth quickly began thinking about each sequence's design and continuity, with the death scenes intriguing him the most. "I thought that would be the humour of the thing - how to do it so that it wasn't just gruesome." Eager to get involved, Bluth Group still needed to consider how they would finance *Dragon's Lair*. "Each partner company was to finance its own portion of the deal," explained Goldman. The problem was that the 1982 Screen Cartoonists Union strike had interrupted their studio operations, and backers had become nervous. "We had to borrow cash to get involved, from friends, relatives, and whoever we could convince that

this was a solid idea."

Development on *Dragon's Lair* had to be swift if AMS were to release the first LaserDisc arcade video game in North America, so the Bluth Group compiled three colour sequences over three months that AMS was able to develop into interactive scenes, and Cinematronics could demonstrate at the 1983 AOE (Amusement Operators Expo) in Chicago. Praised as the most innovative video game at the AOE - a radical departure from the usual



arcade fare - *Dragon's Lair* was an outstanding success, securing approximately \$10 million for Cinematronics in just three days. Not bad, considering the total budget for *Dragon's Lair* was just \$1 million!

To keep production costs low, Bluth could not hire models for reference, so he looked for inspiration elsewhere, discovering Goldman's collection of *Playboy* magazines. For players who could reach the dragon's lair through countless quarters, Princess Daphne was the reward; designed with flowing blonde hair, big eyes with batting lashes, and a see-through gown covering very revealing swimwear. Unfortunately, Bluth was also unable to hire any actors - except for Michael Rye, best known for *The Lone Ranger* animated television series, who provided the narration for *Dragon's Lair*'s iconic 'attract mode' [an industry term for the enticing footage that plays onscreen when the game isn't in use]. Vera Lanpher, head of the clean-up department at Bluth Group, provided Daphne's iconic voice. Likewise, while limited to exclamations (the most

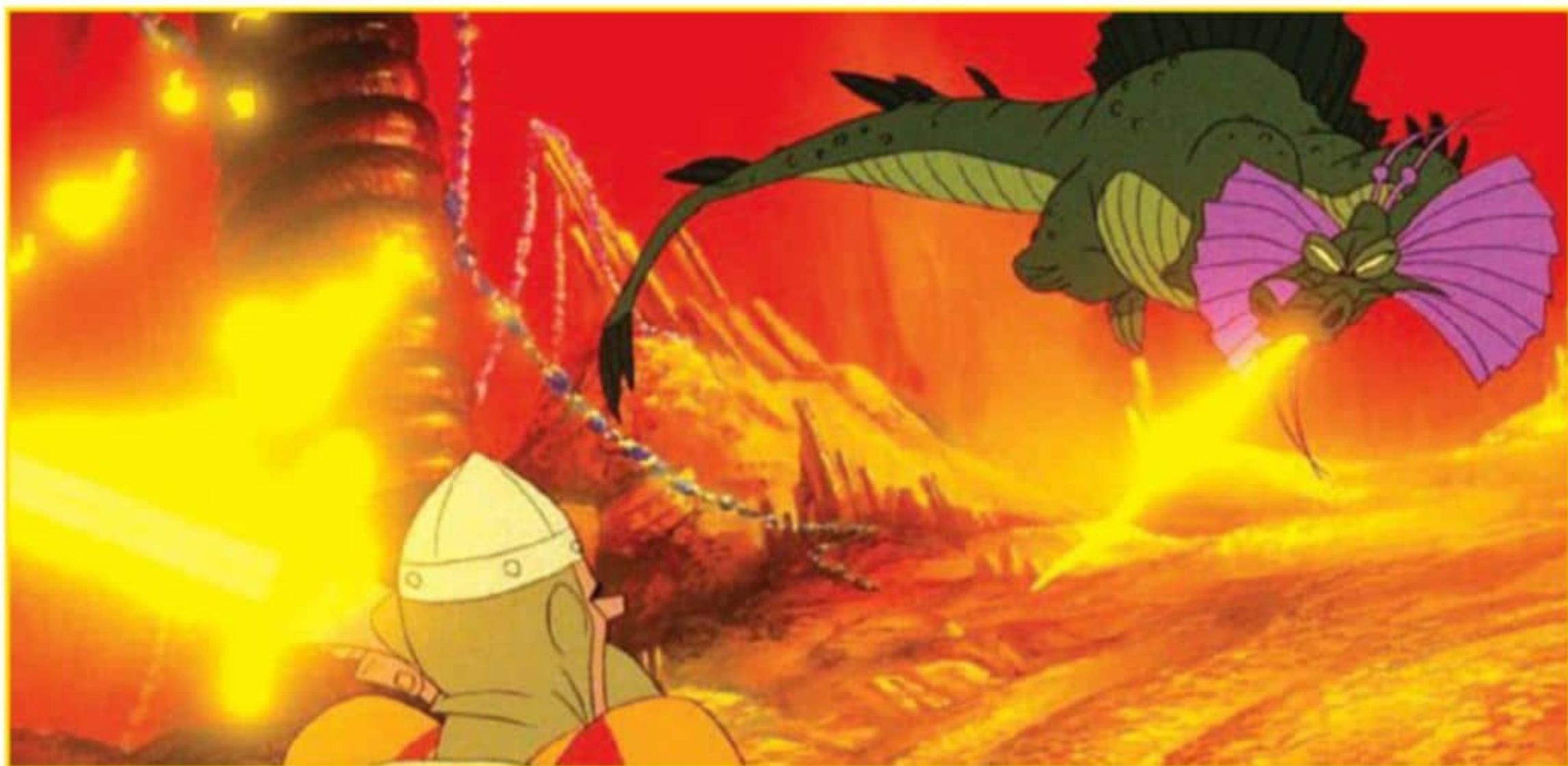
excitable of which occurs upon entering the dragon's lair and discovering Princess

Daphne), film editor Dan Molina provided Dirk the Daring's voice.

Within three months after the AOE, *Dragon's Lair* was ready to be distributed to arcades across North America and Europe, beating *Astron Belt*'s delayed North American release by a mere few months. Cabinets were already making their way to arcades nationwide, and Atari had licensed the game for European distribution. Nothing could compare to the immersive visual quality of *Dragon's Lair*, but could it still compete against popular cabinets like Namco's *Pac-Man* or Nintendo's *Donkey Kong*? The momentum within the arcade industry was also slowing down due to the rising dominance of home video game consoles like the Atari 2600 (aka the Atari Video Computer System or Atari VCS). Would players prefer to spend their quarters on *Dragon's Lair* or sit at home playing *Pitfall*?

No one need have worried when *Newsweek* proclaimed, "*Dragon's Lair* is this summer's hottest new toy: the first arcade game in the United States with a movie-quality image to go along with the action... The game has been devouring kids' coins at

"THERE IS A SINCERE DESIRE ON THE PART OF DISNEY TO PERPETUATE THE ART OF ANIMATION, BUT THE STUDIO WASN'T TEACHING" DON BLUTH



top speed since it appeared." *Dragon's Lair* was even the cover feature of *STARBURST* #68! With a soundtrack scored and performed by Chris Stone at EFX Systems using an E-mu Emulator and Memory MOOG, the forty-three-second attract loop had players queuing up for hours to play. "*Dragon's Lair: The fantasy adventure where you become a valiant knight on a quest to rescue the fair princess from the clutches of an evil dragon. You control the actions of a daring adventurer, finding his way through the castle of a dark wizard, who has enchanted it with treacherous monsters and obstacles. In the mysterious caverns below the castle, your odyssey continues against the awesome forces that oppose your efforts to reach the dragon's lair. Lead on, adventurer. Your quest awaits!*"

Through addictive trial-and-error gameplay, *Dragon's Lair* would ultimately generate \$48 million in revenue, two quarters at a time! Work immediately began on its spiritual successor, *Space Ace*, with an increased budget of \$2.5 million. The player controls Ace, defender of justice, truth, and the planet Earth, who must defeat the villainous Commander Borf,

voiced by Bluth himself. Michael Rye returned to provide narration for the attract mode, and Cinematronics was able to blast *Space Ace* into arcades by the end of 1983 via a conversion kit for the existing *Dragon's Lair* cabinets. While not as successful as *Dragon's Lair*, *Space Ace* itself became a cult classic; another hit in an increasing wave of LaserDisc arcade video games, including Stern's *Cliff Hanger* (1983), Atari's *Firefox* (1984), and Data East's *Cobra Command* (1984).

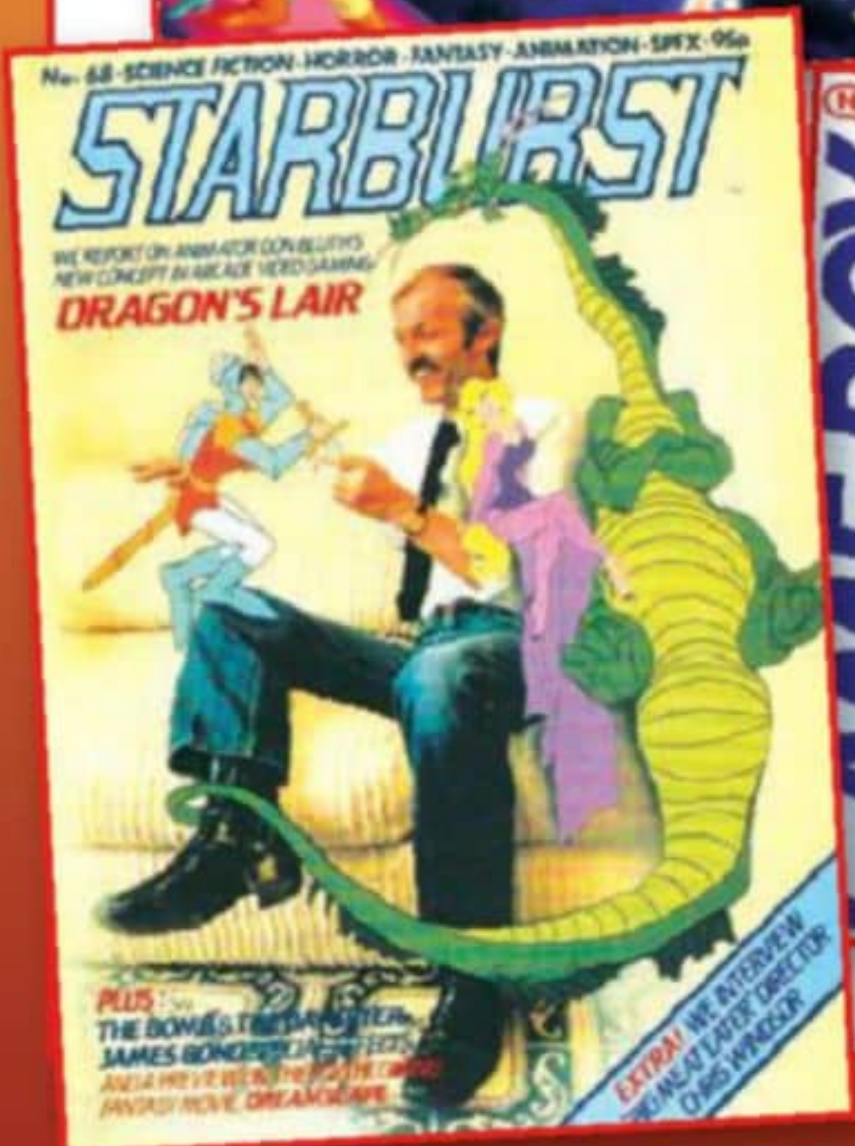
Space Ace and *Dragon's Lair* were also licenced to Ruby-Spears Productions for two short-lived Saturday morning cartoon series broadcast in 1984. For its animated television adaptation, *Space Ace* would appear as part of the cartoon block *Saturday Supercade*. *Dragon's Lair* would receive thirteen half-hour episodes, with Dirk the Daring facing a cliffhanger before each commercial break. In keeping with the spirit and novelty of the video game, the narrator would ask: "*What would you do?*" The outcome of each choice was then shown before advancing the story.

A true arcade sequel to *Dragon's Lair* seemed inevitable, and work was indeed underway, but there was one problem: the 'Atari shock'! More commonly known as the video game crash of 1983, the United States became saturated with poor-quality video game hardware and software, particularly from Atari. Naturally, everyone wanted to make a fast buck, but weakening

consumer confidence and a slowdown in sales had made retailers nervous. Could stocking video games be sustainable? While the Atari shock mainly affected the home video game market, it was clear that the golden age of arcade video games had ended. *Dragon's Lair II: Time Warp* was subsequently shelved.

Bluth Group ceased to exist, but from it emerged Sullivan Bluth Studios in 1984, a partnership between Bluth, Goldman, Pomery, and businessman Morris Sullivan. A few years earlier, Steven Spielberg had spoken with Bluth Group regarding *The Secret of NIMH*. "*He told us that he thought animation like this had died with Walt Disney,*" recalled Bluth. However, Spielberg was also interested in collaborating with Bluth. Time had passed since that conversation, but true to his word, the *Jaws* director returned to collaborate with Sullivan Bluth Studios on an animated feature titled *An American Tail*. Meanwhile, out of bitterness towards *The Secret of NIMH*, Disney's *The Black Cauldron* was nearing completion. But with a budget of approximately \$44 million, Disney could only recoup \$21 million domestically when it was finally released in 1985. In comparison, *An American Tail* would become one of the highest-grossing non-Disney animated features during the 1980s, earning \$84 million worldwide against a \$9 million budget upon its 1986 release. However, the rivalry with Disney was far from over, with Sullivan Bluth Studios again collaborating with Spielberg on the critically acclaimed *The Land Before Time* (1988).

During this period, Sullivan Bluth Studios also began to





supervise the home ports of *Dragon's Lair*; with the first pixelated conversion from Coleco appearing on the Coleco Adam home computer in 1984, followed by ports from Software Projects based on the Coleco conversion released on the Amstrad CPC, Commodore 64, and ZX Spectrum in 1986. Software Projects would also later release a pseudo-sequel in 1987, known as *Dragon's Lair: Escape from Singe's Castle*. By the early 1990s, *Dragon's Lair* had been transformed by Elite Systems into a cinematic platformer for the Nintendo Entertainment System and Super Nintendo. Elite Systems would also release its own pseudo-sequel for the Nintendo Game Boy, known as *Dragon's Lair: The Legend*. But it was ReadySoft who provided the game with its most sophisticated conversion for the Amiga 500, Atari ST, and MS-DOS, prompting a similar conversion of *Space Ace*.

Recovering from Atari shock, the video game industry was starting to see home video games catch up to the quality of their arcade counterparts. Sullivan Bluth Studios, still in possession of the animated footage they had completed for *Dragon's Lair II: Time Warp*, partnered with ReadySoft to release the long-anticipated sequel in the early 1990s. However, it would require a different approach to convert *Dragon's Lair II* to home computers, as this time, there was no LaserDisc to work from like *Dragon's Lair* and *Space Ace*, only videotape. So, while ReadySoft prepared *Dragon's Lair II* for its home computer release, Sullivan Bluth Studios restarted production on the arcade version with the assistance of the Leland Corporation.



THROUGH ADDICTIVE TRIAL-AND-ERROR GAMEPLAY, DRAGON'S LAIR WOULD ULTIMATELY GENERATE \$48M IN REVENUE, TWO QUARTERS AT A TIME!

Praised for being an improvement on the original, *Dragon's Lair II: Time Warp* would find success on home computers, but more importantly, it had concluded its journey to the arcade, eight years after the release of *Dragon's Lair*. Sullivan Bluth Studios would continue to collaborate with ReadySoft. They released *Space Ace II: Borf's Revenge* (1991) and *Dragon's Lair III: The Curse of Mordread* (1993) - pseudo-sequels to the home computer versions - and near arcade-perfect conversions of *Dragon's Lair*, *Space Ace*, and *Dragon's Lair II: Time Warp* for CD-ROM-enabled hardware like the Compact Disc-Interactive (CD-i).

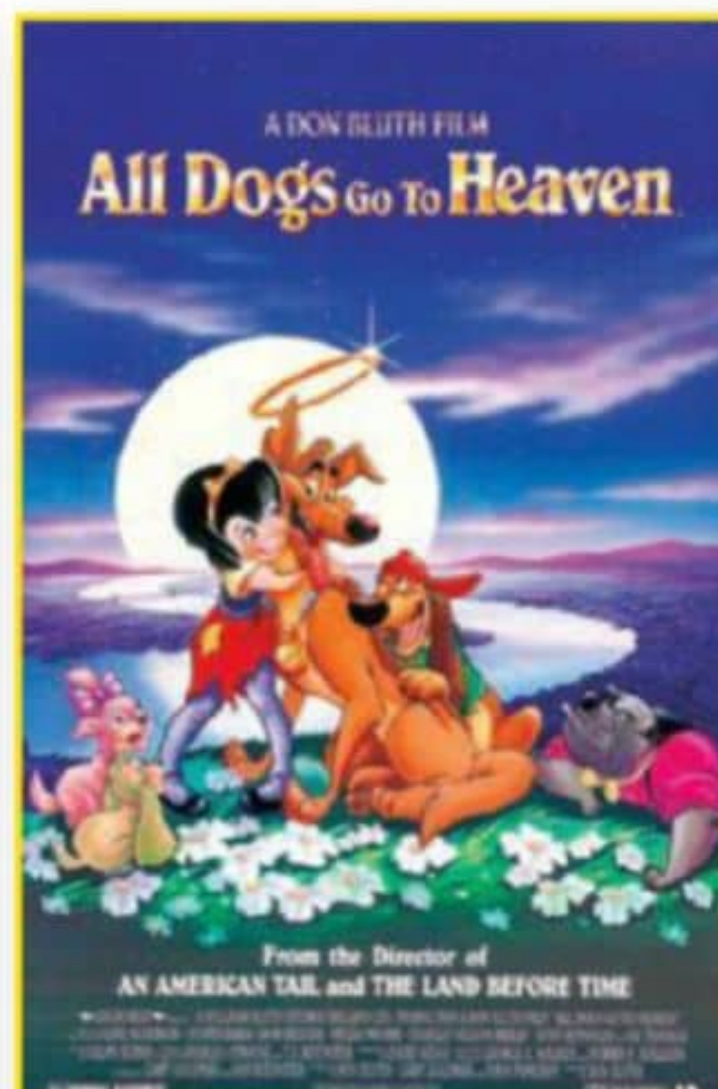
While Pomeroy would eventually return to Disney, Bluth and Goldman continued to work independently in the animation industry, releasing numerous animated features, including *All Dogs Go to Heaven* (1989), before establishing Fox Animation Studios in 1994 with 20th Century Fox's Bill Mechanic. By 1997, amongst tough competition from Disney, Fox Animation Studios had released their debut animated feature, *Anastasia*,

earning the studio \$140 million worldwide. Yet, despite their early success, Fox Animation Studios was shut down shortly after the release of Bluth's final animated feature, the sci-fi cult classic *Titan A.E.* (2000).

Over the next two decades, Bluth would bestow his knowledge of traditional animation onto the next generation; through a series of books and the online animation curriculum: Don Bluth University. Alongside Goldman, Pomeroy and Dyer, Bluth would return to his most enduring creation, *Dragon's Lair*. He collaborated with Dragonstone Software and Ubi Soft in developing *Dragon's Lair 3D: Return to the Lair* (2002) and with Digital Leisure in remastering *Dragon's Lair*, *Space Ace*, and *Dragon's Lair II: Time Warp*. Now, at 85, Bluth wants to finally see *Dragon's Lair: The Movie* on the marquee!

In the early 1990s, Walt Disney's nephew Roy E. Disney gave Bluth an ultimatum. "I want you to come back to the studio. All is forgiven. You can't win this, Don. We'll crush you." Prompted by their rivalry, Disney was then in the midst of a renaissance; a return to producing critically and commercially successfully animated features, including *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and *The Lion King* (1994). Bluth declined. "What's phenomenal is that we made eleven full-length animated films before the Disney machinery was able to throw sand in our machine."

Netflix is currently in development on a live-action DRAGON'S LAIR movie starring Ryan Reynolds. Watch this space, ace!



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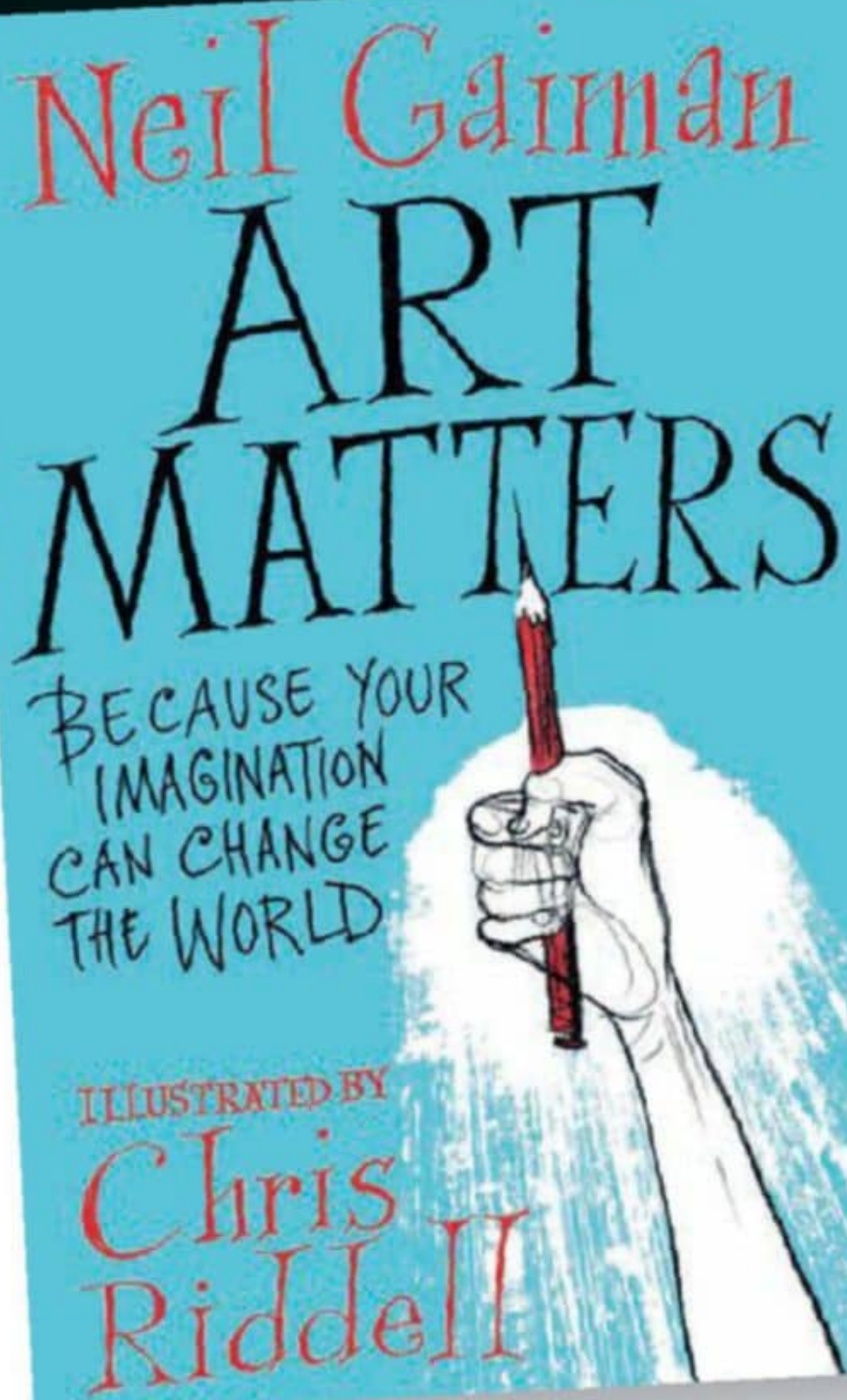
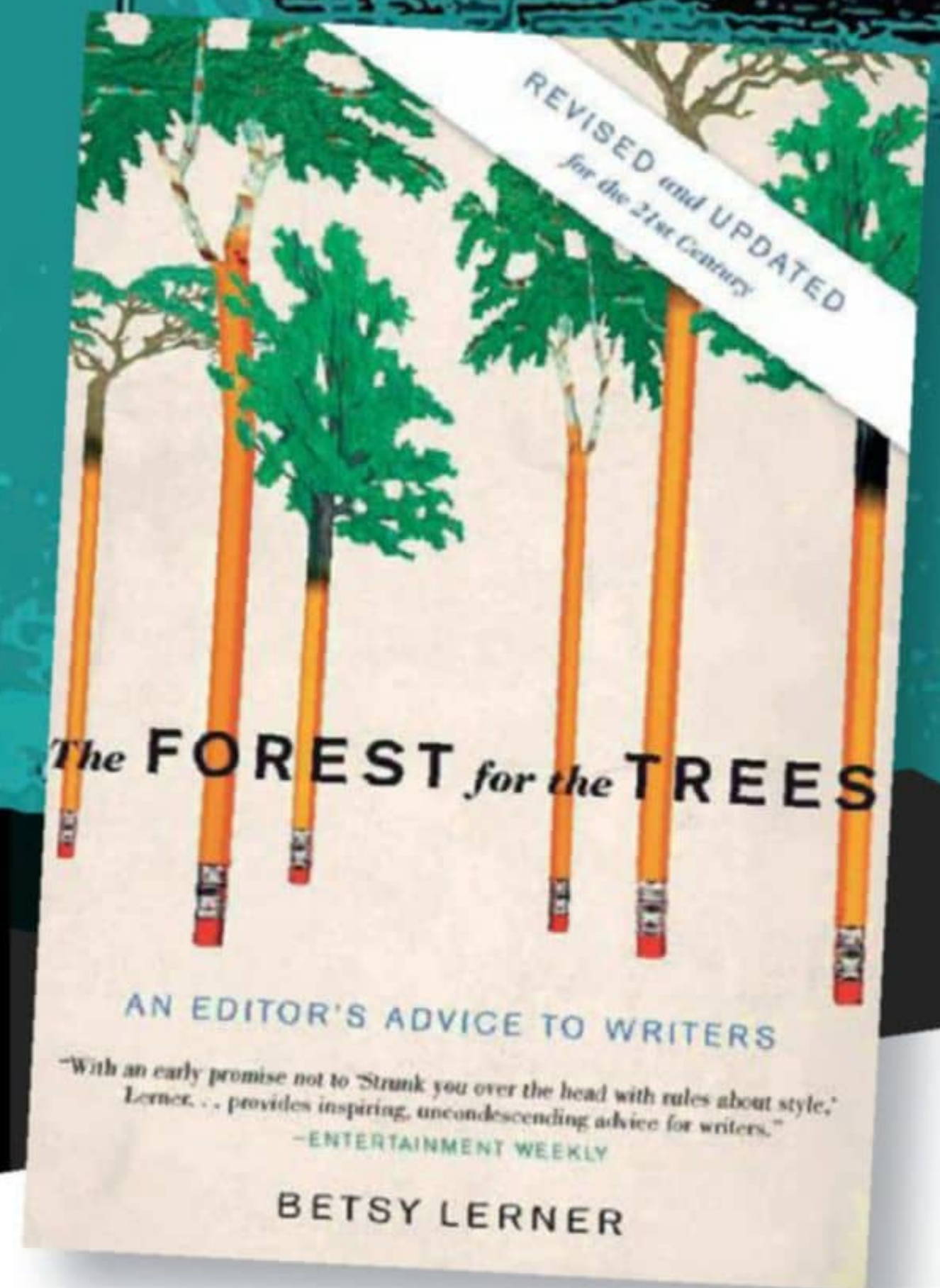


**CULT
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BRAVE NEW WORDS

by
Ed Fortune



Writing advice is something that's seemingly everywhere. You only need to dip onto social media to find multiple writers of various levels of experience and quality freely handing out all sorts of useful tips for the budding creative. A cynic might say that creating advice about writing is an excellent way to avoid having to write an actual book and this has some merit; many writers count procrastination as one of their best skills. This urge to pass on advice (regardless of the motivation) has generated some absolutely fabulous resources for folk, though. One piece that springs to mind is Neil Gaiman's

Art Matters. Illustrated by the wild and wonderful Chris Riddell, it's a collection of speeches Gaiman has delivered over the years about why creativity is important to a functioning society. I count it as writing advice here because it's quite inspirational and that sort of thing is really important when struggling with the dreaded blank page. It's also fairly short and the hardback version can easily slot onto most shelves, which makes it a fabulous choice for the sort of book you leave in the bathroom. It's not quite a cure for writer's block, but it's a good addition to any list. Gareth Powell's *About Writing* is a great field guide to the world of publishing and sets out simple things like getting into the right mindset, managing expectations, and cultivating habits that will help you get ahead in the world of publishing. Gareth's warmth and expertise comes across on the page and it's filled with handy thoughts and approaches to the job, as well as tips on how to handle things like publishers, social media, and the dreaded rejection letter. Gareth is best known for the science fiction series *Embers of War* and everything in *About Writing* comes from hard-earned experience. This isn't a 'how to write' book, it's more a 'how to be a writer who stays happy', and as such, it's invaluable. A frequently recommended book is *The Writer Got Screwed (But Didn't Have To)*, another industry guide that talks about how to negotiate contracts and get paid for your hard

work. It was written in the '90s and has a mostly film and TV industry focus, but some of the tips and tricks are pretty much timeless. It's also readily available second-hand. Similarly, Betsy Lerner's *The Forest for the Trees* is written by a professional editor and half the book is about how to get your head around the solitary job that is writing. The other half lays out the process of getting a book finished and published. It's useful, albeit not essential.

Jeff VanderMeer's *Wonderbook* is about the process of imagination, which sounds a little bit odd, but then it's a pretty strange book! Heavy on the metaphor and lavishly illustrated, it's crammed with exercises, inspiration, and essays. Jeff's best known for the novel *Annihilation*, but he's had a long and much lauded career. The *Wonderbook* is very visual and is designed to make you think in a variety of different ways. It



The Writer Got Screwed

(but didn't have to)

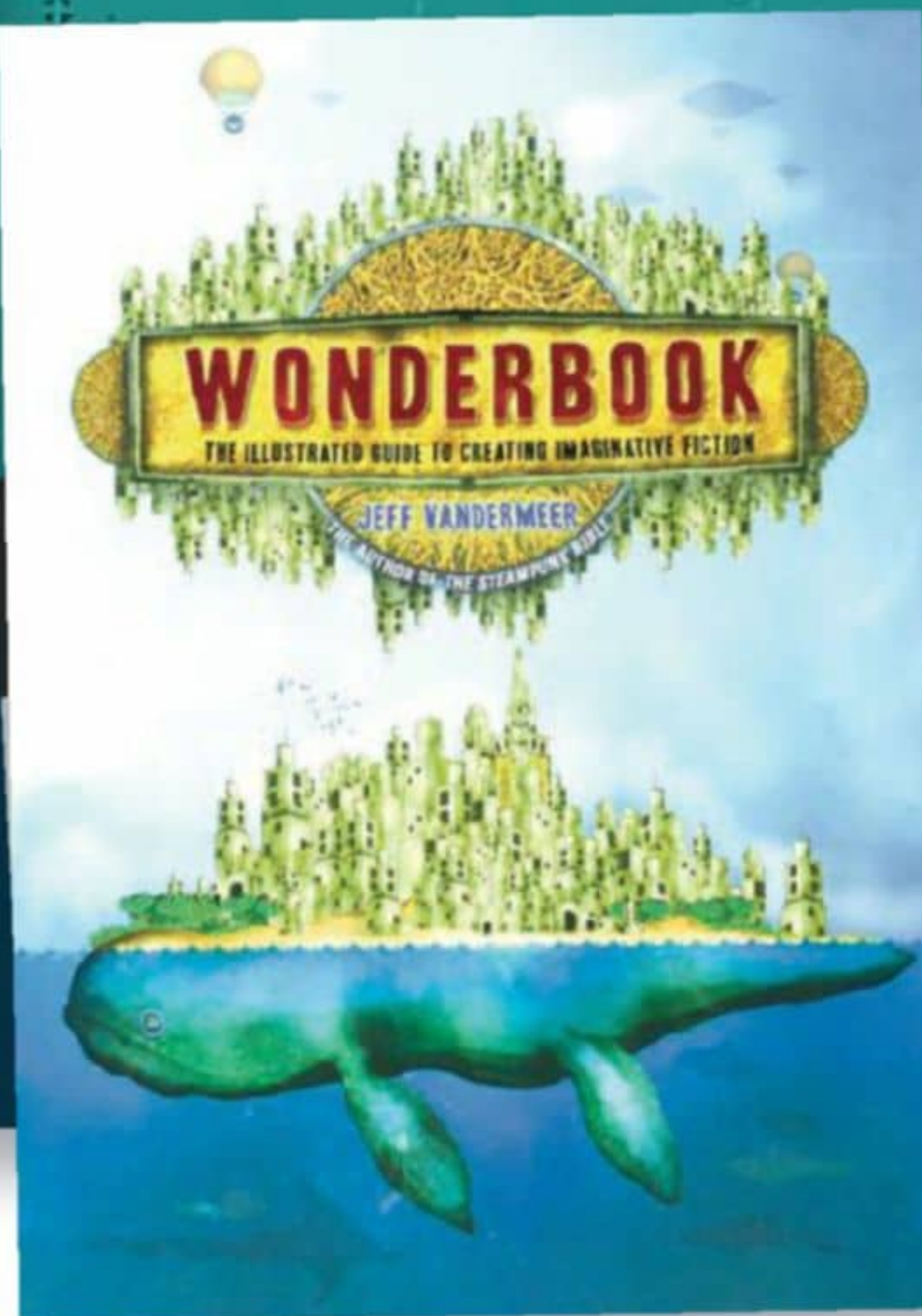
A Guide to the Legal and Business Practices of Writing for the Entertainment Industry

"A wonderful book... mandatory reading for anyone contemplating a career in Hollywood."
—J.F. Lawton, screenwriter for *Pretty Woman* and *Under Siege*

BROOKE A. WHARTON

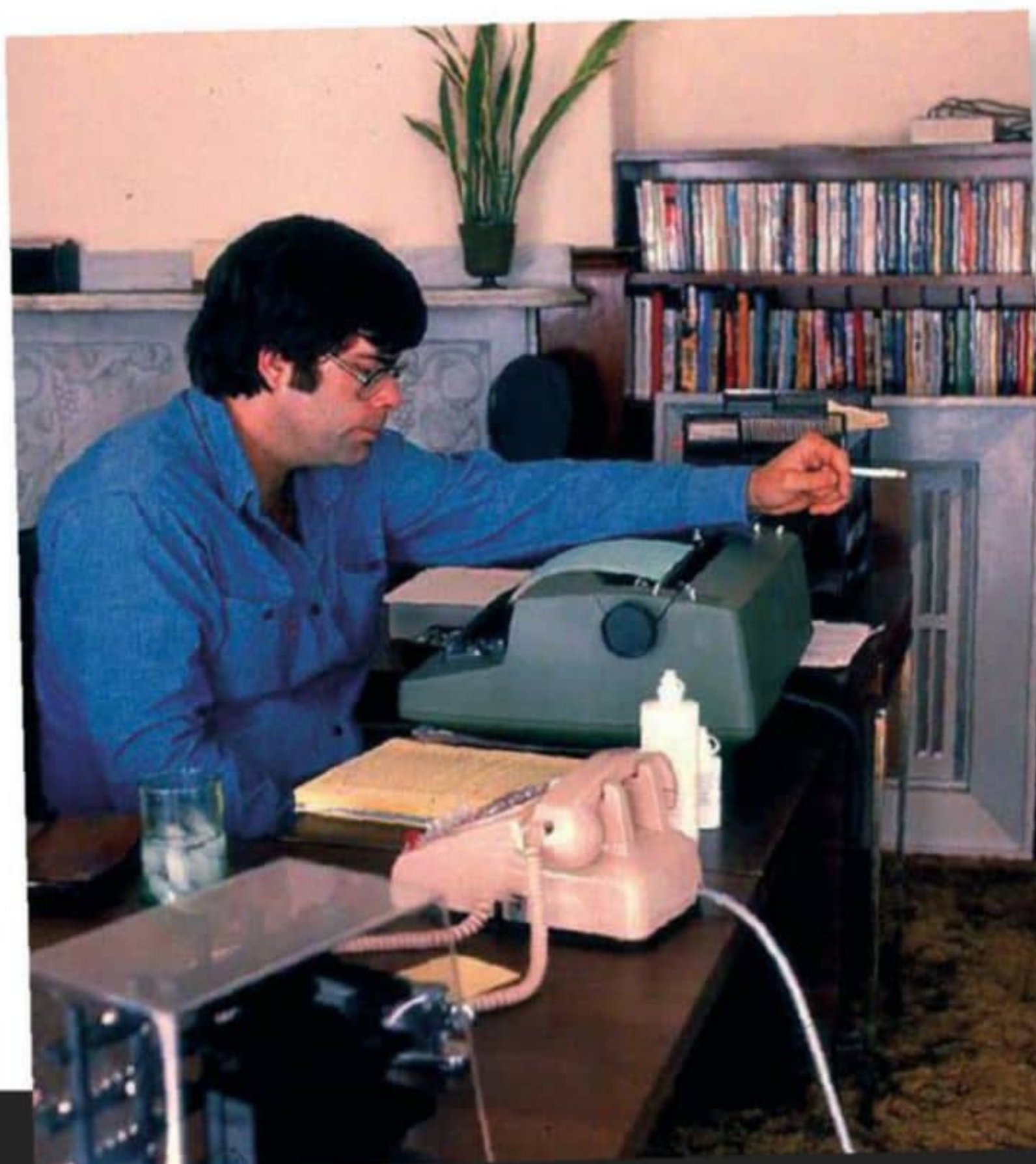
has collaborations from other famous writers, including Ursula Le Guin, George R.R. Martin, Neil Gaiman, and Catherynne M. Valente. This is less a book that's used in a single sitting, and more the sort of thing that you sit down to work with, like a wacky text book. It's perfect for the writer who perhaps lacks the confidence to fill the page every day, because if you can't manage to write something, you can always study. The *Wonderbook* is the closest thing you'll get to attending a Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Workshop without actually leaving the house! Which brings us onto the next big thing you should read if you want to be a writer...

If you ask any successful novelist (and a fair few unsuccessful ones), you'll gather that they tend to read a lot of books, which makes sense. You're hoping that people will read your book, so you should return the favour. Even the trashiest book will teach you something about style, content, or efficient storytelling. Your favourite fantasy novelist doesn't just read fantasy novels and, of course, Tolkien was a professor of linguistics and a student of history. If you can't write, read. And don't feel bad if you can't write every day, some of us have



lives that don't accommodate that. But if you're always thinking about writing, reading books to inspire that writing, and when you can, actually writing, well then congratulations - you're a writer!

Another useful thing to do is to turn up to book festivals and talk to fellow fans. Film fans who attend film festivals often become filmmakers (and this is certainly true of the STARBURST International Film Festival!), and those who go to book events often end up writing their own stories. The UK is blessed with a load of good events.



Eastercon is a national SF literature event that technically changes city every year but spends a lot of time in the south of England. It's full of writers, publishers, and fans. It's a long weekend of workshops, panels, talks... and drinking! Some of your favourite books probably got dreamed up at the bar of an Eastercon. Similarly, Worldcon is the international version of the same thing. It's longer, bigger, and louder. This year's Worldcon is in China, but next year's is in Glasgow. Scotland's national SF bookish convention is called Satelite, and it's small and hyper-friendly. See also Cymera, an Edinburgh-based festival, which has a more commercial vibe and usually better guests. Edge-Lit in Derby is also worth checking out for meeting publishing industry types. Back onto books, one of the things all writers should read is Stephen King's *On Writing*. It's a memoir as well as a guide, and it's written in a style that will be familiar to fans of King. He's blunt to the point of brutality at times and talks frankly about the highs and lows of his life. King lives to write and he bares a glint of his soul across this book. It's a 'must have' and even if you hate it, try to finish it. Alan Moore's *Writing for Comics* is much shorter



(only 48 pages) and is appropriately comic book sized. It's a solid look at the craft, similar to King's *On Writing* in its blunt approach, and is just as inspirational. If you can afford it, check out Moore's course on the BBC Maestro service. The workbook is excellent and he unpacks the elements of writing that he considers holy/mystical a bit more, while still keeping the whole thing accessible. Moore is warm and almost kindly in places, and is a great motivation. There are other courses on Maestro worth a look: Malorie Blackman is more formal in style, but also an excellent insight into one of the UK's most celebrated writers. It goes without saying that liking the work of a writer does help when you're looking for guides and

BOOK >>> WORMHOLE

A VINTAGE GENRE PICK FROM KATE FATHERS

Gwyneth Jones' book doesn't have the same break-neck pacing as *Mad Max*, but it does take the same approach to worldbuilding. *Divine Endurance*, first published in 1987, is about a girl and her cat. The android Cho (short for 'Chosen Among the Beautiful') and her cat, Divine Endurance, set out across what was once China and Malaysia to Indonesia to search for Cho's twin brother Wo, encountering the ruling matriarchal society and the rebels who strive for gender equality. Like in *Mad Max*, Jones hurls you into the middle of a new world and lets it unfold naturally, its rules, habits, and history something that the reader pieces together from off-hand comments and context clues. While the lack of exposition can sometimes make the story a little confusing, it does make Jones' world feel real. We never even learn how far in the future we are, because why would characters state a fact that "everybody knows"?



Divine Endurance is the Mad Max: Fury Road of novels.

Like all quests, Cho's takes a detour. The spine of the novel might be Cho's journey to find her brother, but the meat is the rebellion against the matriarchy and the relationships between the characters that Cho meets. *Divine Endurance* doesn't have a strict protagonist, instead oscillating between multiple narrations. There's the cat, who's old and wise and has an agenda that kicks off the story. There's

Cho, who's quiet and naïve, and who helps draw the characters together. There's Derveet, the rebellion leader. There's Atoon, the prince. There's Handai. There's Leilah. Each narration offers a distinct perspective that adds to the story's dynamism, although the sheer number of voices does make the story a little cluttered. But that's a minor problem; the way the characters play off each other, arguing, scheming, and dealing in surprising kindness, is one of the novel's strengths. As is watching Cho become more tangled in humanity's story, only to become more human herself.

It's at the end of the novel where things start to unravel. Jones' writing style is very subtle and considered, rife with beautiful descriptions and arresting observations, yet leaving a lot to the reader's imagination. At the beginning of Cho's story, this is very effective, but as more characters are added, and the rebellion picks up steam, Jones' writing style starts to muddle her plot points and character arcs. Stronger voices drown out Cho's perspective. Cho's quest gets lost as you struggle to keep track of the rebellion's intricacies. Tossing your audience into a new world without a backstory or appendix works in a simple story like *Mad Max*, but a story of *Divine Endurance*'s size and scope needs more concrete language to ground the reader. Although this doesn't take away from the incredibly poignant ending.

As its title suggests, *Divine Endurance* is a book that will stick with you. Jones tackles big ideas using a stripped-back approach, using complicated characters to expose our simplest desires: hope, love, and dignity. You can't help but admire it.

BE BOLD.
BE REBELLIOUS.
CHOOSE ART.
IT MATTERS.

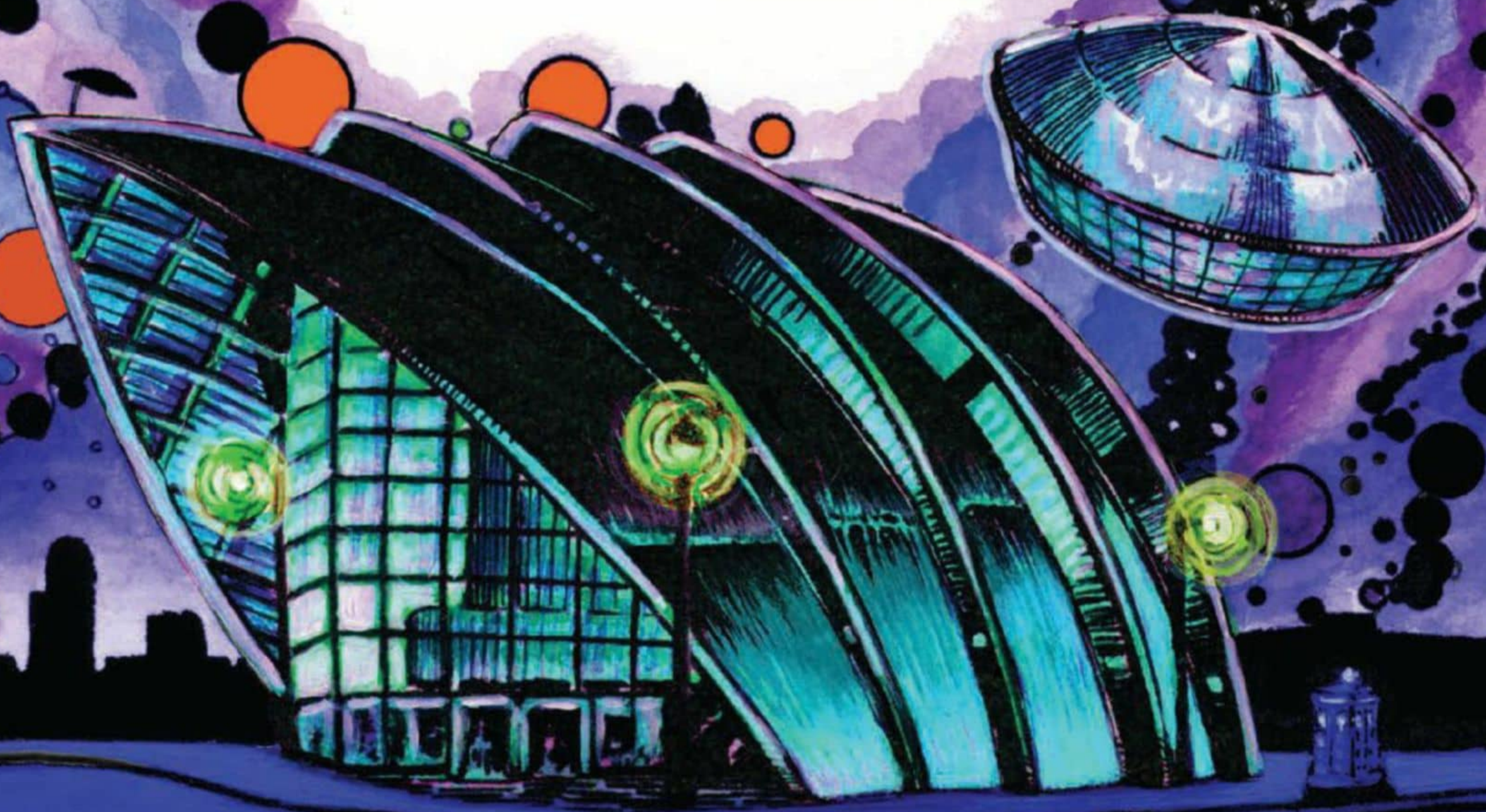
courses like this! And finally, when you've gotten your book written, re-drafted, re-written, and it's ready for the world, get the *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook*, which is a guide and contacts list for those looking to work in the industry. It comes out annually and is also stuffed full of essays on the craft. Read it and pay attention to how to submit work; the biggest reason writers fail to get published is because they don't read the submission guidelines. Right then, armed with all that, I expect to be reviewing your amazing masterpiece soon for STARBURST's fabulous website! Good luck to anyone taking on the challenge this year.

Ed Fortune is really wanting to write about the whole mystic side of writing, but suddenly realised that it was a bit pretentious, even for him. He can be found stalking the wasteland that is twitter as @ed_fortune and you can email him your ravings at ed.fortune@starburstmagazine.com

Glasgow 2024

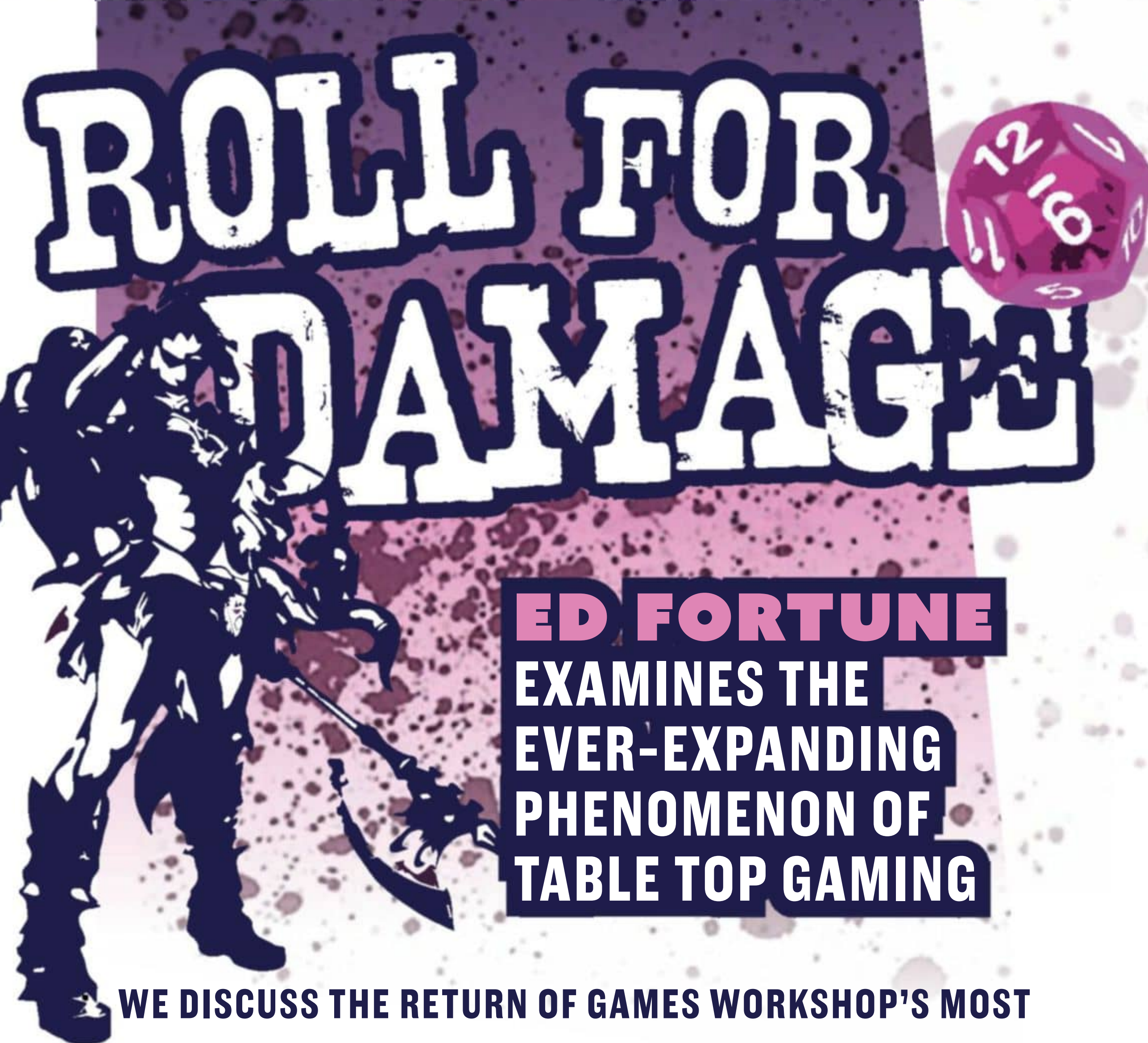
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ROLL FOR DAMAGE

ED FORTUNE
EXAMINES THE
EVER-EXPANDING
PHENOMENON OF
TABLE TOP GAMING

WE DISCUSS THE RETURN OF GAMES WORKSHOP'S MOST REMARKABLE ALIEN RACES, AND GET ALL EXCITED ABOUT SOME NEW BOARD GAMES COMING SOON...

History doesn't so much repeat itself, but it does like remixes. Case in point, *Dungeons & Dragons*. The game's history has suffered from a pattern of growth, litigation, and collapse since its early days. The pattern is broadly this: *D&D* gets bigger than its current management can handle and people who don't understand the community get brought in. They get greedy and effectively try to charge people for their own imaginations. Interest in the game collapses, and then *D&D* re-emerges, phoenix-like, with a slightly tattered reputation. To an outsider, *Dungeons & Dragons* might seem like a cultural juggernaut, but the history of the game is filled with managerial, design, and other blunders that have meant that *D&D* has always been beholden to its fans more so than other franchises. *D&D* is owned by Wizards of the Coast, which these days is owned by Hasbro, a company better known for NERF guns and *Monopoly* than for manuals that explore how to turn one's fantasies and daydreams into a fun activity you can do with friends. Fans of the fantasy game learned this earlier this year, when Hasbro got greedy and pretty much did everything it could to annoy the community. You may have caught some of this online, so we'll try and add some

context to explain not only what happened, but 'why' it happened.

Hasbro had inherited a number of things when they bought Wizards of the Coast back in 1999. In addition to a huge body of fiction (that they could turn into movies, TV shows, and other media),



a growing fanbase, and a lot of fan-produced fiction, they also inherited the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*. This version of the game was special because it featured a thing called the OGL (Open Game License). Essentially it allowed third-party companies to use a SRD

(System Reference Document) to produce games and adventures for *Dungeons & Dragons* without worrying about licensing fees or getting sued. Litigation between games companies connected to *D&D* is something that had almost killed the game in the '80s and '90s, so this was broadly seen as a good move. It also led to a boom in *D&D*-related product. Effectively, if you wanted to write a new RPG, it was a good idea to adapt the *D&D* rules because most people now had a copy of that rules-set, making it the industry standard.



Wizards didn't use the OGL for its fourth edition. The game flopped, and this really helped out a company called Paizo, who produce a *D&D*-like game called *Pathfinder*, which ran under the OGL. When the fifth edition of the game rolled out, it kept the OGL (and updated the SRD to the new edition). Suddenly, *D&D* was back in the top spot, appearing in shows like *Stranger Things*, getting celebrity endorsements, and even a new movie.

However, on January 5th, 2023, Gizmodo journalist Linda Codega published an article online called *Dungeons & Dragons' New License Tightens its Grip on Competition*. Linda had obtained a leaked draft of a new license, one that would unauthorise the original OGL and prohibit anything new being produced under the previous arrangement. The old license was only 900 words long. The new one would have superseded the original, was ten times longer, and imposed heavy restrictions on the control, creation, and ownership of third-party material for the game under a complicated-looking tiered system. In short, it would completely nuke over 20 years' worth of hard work and goodwill from the *D&D* community.

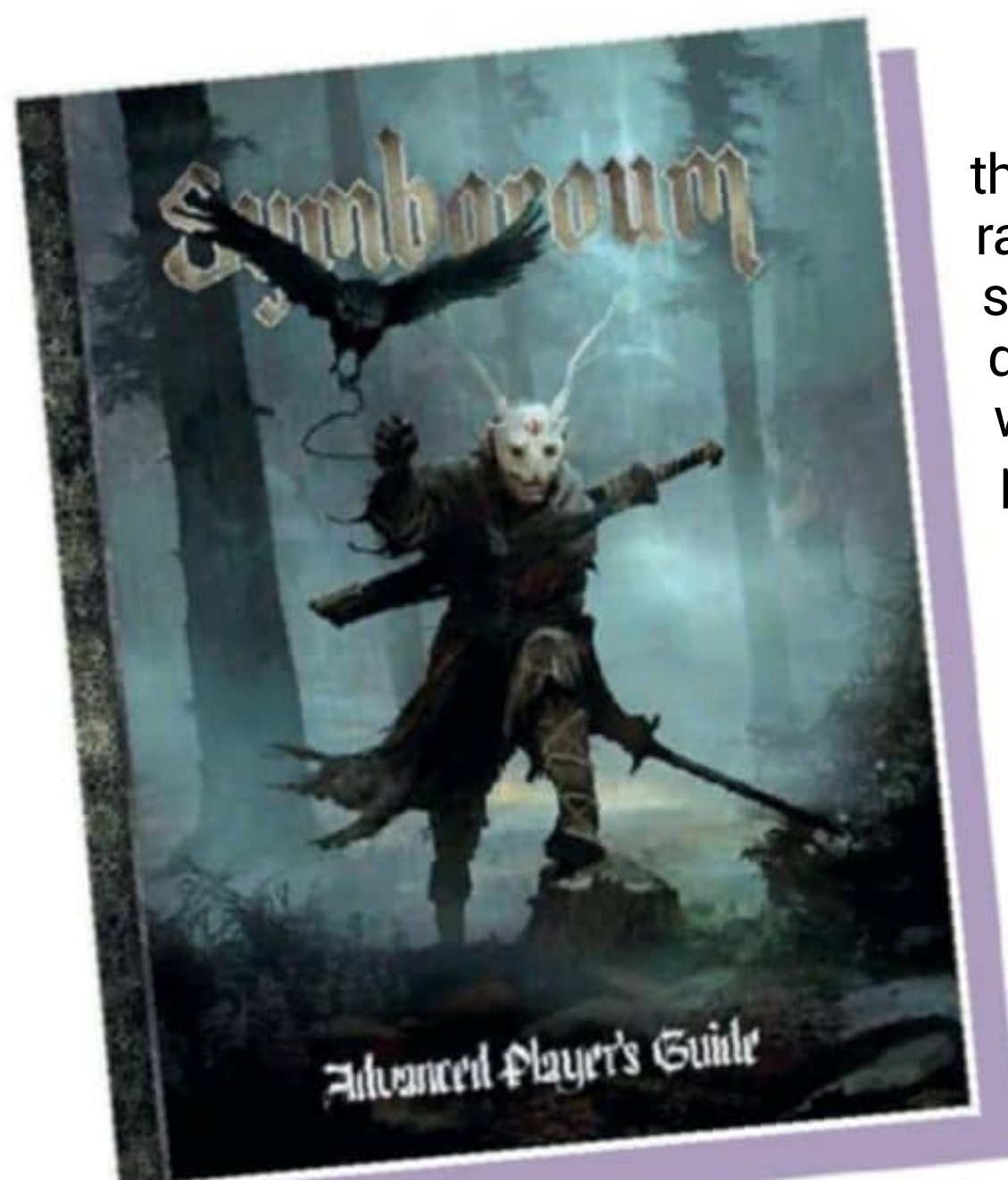
Folk who'd made a living by promoting a game they love (but never controlled) would be under the whims of a massive, uncaring corporation. The community acted swiftly in response. Although in most cases, online campaigns only make

a small part of any hobby group, a lot of people play *D&D* and similar games through Zoom/Google Meet/Teams, etc. It's a very online community. Immediate responses included Paizo and other indie games creators announcing that they were teaming up to create the ORC license, a legal 'safe harbour' for sharing rules mechanics and encouraging innovation and collaboration in tabletop gaming. At the time of writing, over 1500 companies have signed up to be part of this project. Others began the work on legally challenging the notion that old OGL could be deactivated in the way proposed.

All throughout this, no official word came from Wizards of the Coast. Days later, an 'expect a reply soon' response appeared on one of *D&D*'s official Twitter channels. Not the main one, though, and this raised eyebrows. Community voices commented throughout. Mark Hulmes of High Rollers, cosplayer and *D&D* creator Ginny Di, and Ted from Nerd Immersion all contributed thoughts and support to the fans. William Earl, best known to the



community for their comedic *D&D* YouTube videos, then revealed another leak. The main metric the management at Wizards were using were subscriptions to *DnDBeyond*, an online rules-management service that made it easier to play the game over the Internet or even at the table. Like most of these things, most people had annual subscriptions to the service. So fans went online and cancelled the subscription renewal. They still had the service until it renewed, so it was an almost zero-sum protest, because it damaged future profits. That got their attention. *Dungeons & Dragons* executive producer Kyle Brink posted a weird, pseudo-apology that didn't really put people at ease. But it did lead to a digital survey about the OGL. After a period of actually listening to the fans, Wizards finally backed down. The old OGL would remain unmolested and better yet, the entire 5.1 SRD (the current rules document) would become creative commons. It's over, the fans won. As the dust settles, it seems Wizards mostly put the monster back in the jar,



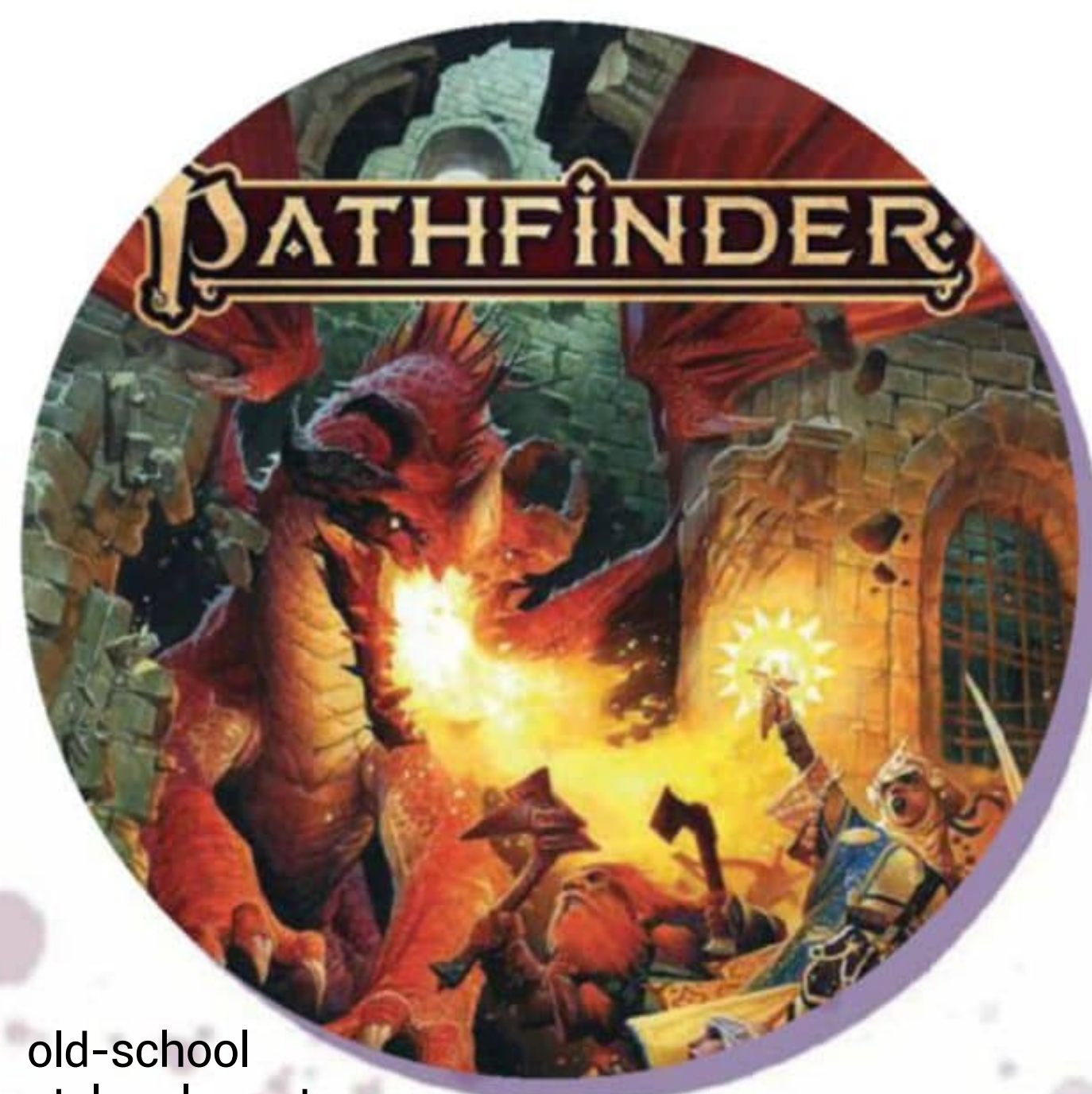
but the landscape is very different now. For a start, the fans now know (and understand) that senior management over at Wizards of The Coast don't have the fannish glee for the community or the game that they've enjoyed with previous owners. Wizards' president Cynthia Williams and executive producer Chris Cao both come from video games backgrounds with micro-transaction and monetisation experience. We understand that neither have ever played *D&D*, and given that a TTRPG is as different from a video game as a Marvel movie is from live opera, this is cause for concern.

And of course, the community of creators is now united with the ORC, and non-*D&D* games suddenly got a huge uptick in sales. A whole plethora of new and interesting games that aren't connected to *D&D* are coming, and a level of *D&D* brand loyalty is likely lost forever. Oh, and amid this mess? A new *D&D* adventure anthology book called *Keys from the Golden Vault* is coming out. It looks great and it's all heists. It's presumably timed for the movie release, which is also a heist. And there's a *D&D* TV series in production, set in the Forgotten Realms. It's got some decent geek cred behind it, so it'll probably be fun. Meanwhile, if all of that didn't put you off, let's take a lightning look at some fantasy TTRPGs that aren't *D&D* that you might want to play...

First up would be Cubicle 7's *Soulbound*. We've raved about this book before, it's the RPG for *Warhammer Age of Sigmar*, which is Games Workshop's high fantasy setting. It's got all the recognisably Warhammer



things in it (chaos, magic that will eat you, ratmen, etc.), but it's high-powered, so you're a super-competent hero rather than a comically doomed foot soldier. It's a smooth, modern RPG with lots of special rules that encourage the party to work together. Insanity and corruption are still very real threats, it's just that you feel like you have a hope in saving the world from the various horror-inspired things that are coming for you. Of course, it's the hope that kills you. Cubicle 7 support this game very well, and if you insist on going old school, they also produce *Warhammer Fantasy Role Play*, a much grittier, darker fantasy game where you're so under-powered compared to the cosmic monsters looking to kill you that it's almost funny. If you like really dark fantasy, though, take a look at *Symbaroum*. It's got elves, it's got a realm that's forgotten, it looks like *D&D* if it had gone ten rounds with a shark and somehow survived. You don't play heroes in so much you play zealots, monster hunters and cultists. The magic in this world wants to destroy you. Think *Dark Souls* meets *D&D*, with a very straightforward d20-based system. *Mork Borg* is an



old-school style rules set that looks like a '90s heavy metal zine. The rules are easy but tough; your character isn't very powerful and can die a messy, graphic death if you don't think and plan. Setting-wise, it's deadly dungeon crawls in a world where the bad guys won a long time ago. Mud, blood and magic rather than swords and sorcery. *13th Age* is a d20-based fantasy RPG created by some of the industry's brightest minds. It's very story-focused, has a wide range of options for characters and encourages players to build the world with their DM. A new edition is getting Kickstarted this year, so watch out for that. Last but not least on this list is *Pathfinder 2nd Edition*, the obvious pretender to *D&D*'s throne. It's quite rules-heavy (part of the fun is slotting rules together) and the fantasy setting is built in a way that pretty much everything is a path to adventure. We'll deep dive more into this in a future edition!

Ed Fortune can be contacted via Twitter @ed_fortune or via ed.fortune@starburstmagazine.com

AND THE WINNERRR IS...

by Nick Spacek

The action-packed Indian drama RRR has been a smash hit all over the world. One of the many highpoints of the movie is the super-catchy song-and-dance routine NAATU NAATU, which recently won a Golden Globe and is now in the running to also take home an Oscar at the upcoming 95th Academy Awards.

We caught up with the composer and songwriter M.M. KEERAVANI and re-recording mixer BOLOY KUMAR DOLOI to talk about how the now-famous sequence and music came together...

STARBURST: *Naatu Naatu* has become an international hit. While you've received dozens of awards for your work, you're now nominated for Best Original Song for this year's Oscars. What's it been like, seeing the international explosion for RRR?

M.M. Keeravani: Like everyone, I have been pushed to a higher limit every time I work with the director [S.S. Rajamouli]. This time, it was the challenging song sequence which we called *Naatu*. The character says, "We are naatu," then the song begins, and I did not expect that single *Naatu* to grow and grow and grow to an international level, and it's naatu, naatu, naatu, naatu, naatu! I'm very happy with the acclaim and the recognition!

Why do you think the song resonates with so many people?

M.M. Keeravani: The *Naatu* song is in 6/8. Normally, 6/8 songs are very rare in the West. This is a very African or Indian form of percussion. So we selected that genre, and we're doing some rhythm patterns with the minimalistic melodic instruments used in the song. And, of course, we are doing the choreography in the proceeding scene and the emotions in the scene, so the song was highlighted, and it became animated in a much bigger way than we expected.

Given the sheer scale of this film and the amount of musical numbers and action sequences, how do you work in re-recording things so that it seems as though it were done on one set?

Boloy Kumar Doloi: The sound mix comes at a later part of the filmmaking process, so after all of these people



have given their best to visually create and assemble everything together, we come in at a later stage and we have to make the film believable. We have to maintain the pace. We have to give the visuals life.

Given the sheer number of locales in which this movie takes place it must have been a massive job!

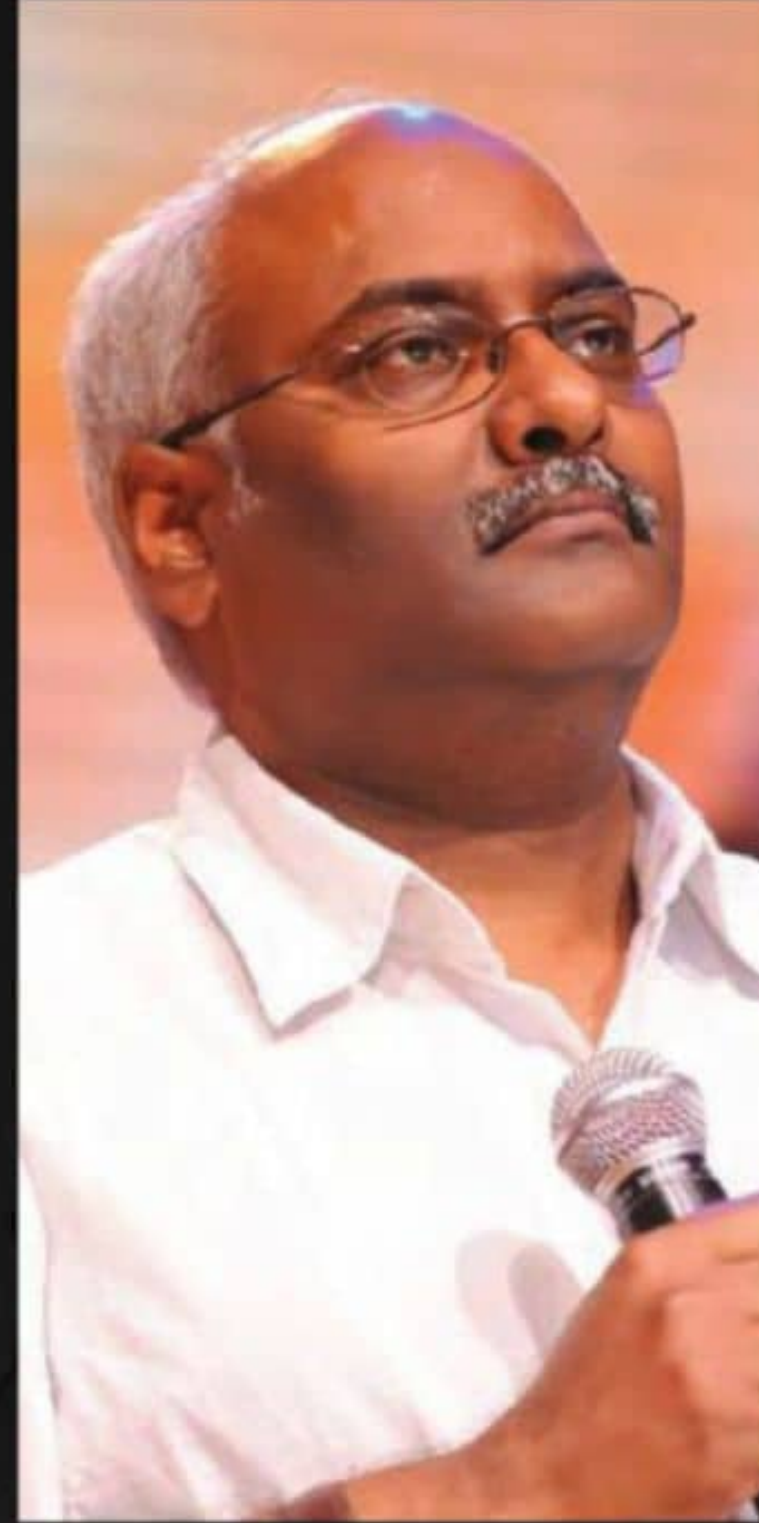
Boloy Kumar Doloi: Yes. The film was very challenging. As the movie flows, it was a very difficult task to maintain the pace. To keep up with the sound was a very challenging job. The director gave us his vision and Keeravani served great music, along with great visuals and great VFX coming across together, we did it.

How long did the process take?

Boloy Kumar Doloi: We took a lot of

time getting there – almost six months getting it right – but we figured it out. If I think of it now, every day was a sheer challenge for us, but we made it work, and everybody loved what we could eventually deliver out of sheer – [laughs] – we can't express it! Our work is so different, it's hard to get across in words, but yeah, it was such a pleasure to work on such a massive film. Going through the journey of the film: it begins with a village and it keeps going on and on and on and on and on, so it was quite difficult. But we kind of pulled it off. [Laughs] I think!

RRR is available to stream on Netflix, while NAATU NAATU can be found on all digital music platforms. Tune in to Sky Cinema on March 13th to watch the 95th Academy Awards and find out whether RRR is victorious!



**“It became
animated in a
much bigger
way than we
expected!”**

- M.M. Keeravani



THE STARBURST GUIDE TO THE SOUNDTRACK SCENE BY NICK SPACEK



While both the BAFTA and Academy Award ceremonies both take place after this column goes to print, we can agree that the 2023 awards season has been one worth taking notice of when it comes to music in film. Son Lux's genre-defying score for the Daniel Scheinert and Dan Kwan's **Everything Everywhere All at Once** was nominated for both ceremonies, yet didn't receive notice at the Golden Globes, where Justin Hurwitz's **Babylon** took home the award. The suspects that have popped up as nominees in all three of the big awards were Volker Bertelmann for **All Quiet on the Western Front** and Carter Burwell for **The Banshees of Inisherin** alongside Hurwitz, with Alexandre Desplat's score to **Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio** and John Williams' **The Fabelmans** getting two of three, much like **Everything Everywhere All at Once**.

We talked about this song in the issue before last, but it's official – the song *Naatu Naatu*, with music by composer M. M. Keeravani and lyrics by Chandrabose from the Telugu action smash, **RRR**, has

been awards season fire, starting when it became the first Asian song to win Best Original Song at the Golden Globes in January. Shortly thereafter, the song from the S. S. Rajamouli-directed picture was nominated for an Academy Award in the same category, meaning that for the first time since **Coco's Remember Me** in 2017 that your columnist will be making a concerted effort to watch the ceremony just to see the live performance as part of the ceremony. Fingers crossed for a win.

In more tangible news, we've become big fans of the output from a new label which has sprung up over the last few months. The mostly-cassette label Mystic Vault just started branching out into vinyl with the Paul Woznicki score for Don Dohler's 1980 sci-fi horror cult classic, **Fiend**, but in the six short months they've been around have managed to also drop the scores to two Todd Sheets obscurities in **The Shivers** and **Whispers in the Gloom**, along with several others. It's been a Todd Sheets renaissance as of late, with the long-running Kansas City splatter horror director's **Moonchild** making its Blu-ray debut from Visual Vengeance, the shot-on-video reissue offshoot of independent horror distributor Wild Eye Movies. That disc contained one of our favorite bonus features, which is the film's soundtrack

on a bonus compact disc, featuring tunes from long-forgotten Kansas City metal acts like Enochian Key (which was basically director Sheets) and Darkside. For those who snagged the disc early, you could also get the soundtrack on limited-edition cassette. If you'd like to know more about the folks behind Mystic Vault, we spoke with the label's Jeremy Kessler and Scott Appleby about their recipe for success, how the label came to be, and their plans for the future for the STARBURST website, and you can find that over there.

The vinyl-releasing Scare Flair Records popped up in early 2022, and over the course of the last year, they've managed to bring some really fun material to the table. As you might guess from their name, the label mainly puts out horror-related titles, but they managed to pull off an amazing coup at the end of 2022 and dropped Luis Bacalov's score for the 1972 Giancarlo Santi spaghetti western **The Grand Duel** as a 50th anniversary deluxe edition. This marks the first time the full and complete score has ever been available on vinyl after a couple of long out-of-print compact disc releases over two decades ago. In addition to four new tracks and new artwork by Tony Stella, the Scare Flair release has exclusive liner notes from Mike Malloy, author of **Lee Van Cleef: A Biographical, Film and Television Reference** and noted 'tough guy film expert'. More in line with Scare Flair's name is their release of the soundtrack to **Friday the 13th** fan film, **Never Hike Alone**. The 2017 winter-set slasher from Womp Stomp Films has garnered over five million views of the hour-long film, with a prequel, **Never Hike in the Snow**, coming in October of 2020 and having racked up well over a million views. With the final installment, **Never Hike Alone 2**, on the way later in 2023, it seems perfect that the first film's score by Ryan Perez-Daple, along with tracks from Trevor Vaughn and The Damn Enchiladas, is now available on LP for fans the world over. With music that homages Harry



Manfredini's classic music for the franchise, yet still stays true to itself, Perez-Daple's score is a real gem. If you don't have a record player, it's also available digitally from Womp Stomp's Bandcamp page, although Adam Michaels' cover art and the 'Campfire Smoke' natural white with black swirl vinyl look so cool, you might just want to grab this while there's still one of the 300 limited-edition copies remaining.

We've seen myriad releases of the Kyle Dixon and Michael Stein score for Netflix's **Stranger Things** over the years, with enough vinyl variants to drive a collector mad, to say nothing of massive streaming versions of the four seasons' worth of music. However, for those who simply want the best of the best, Silva Screen Records has teamed up with London Music Works for a release entitled **Stranger Things: Music from the Upside Down**. Over the course of the 18-track selection of 'musical highlights', London Music Works engages in what the label describes as a bold reworking of the score. While we might not go so far as to hyperbolise it that much, the track selection is top-notch and the production results in a sound which is rich and full.

London Music Works also has another release for Silva Screen in **The Essential Games Music Collection Volume 3**, the follow-up to 2018's **Essential Games Music Collection Volume 2**, compilations intended to highlight some of the best recent video game themes. Featuring compositions from renowned composers like Bear McCreary and Clint Mansell alongside music from **Minecraft** makes this a rather epic selection of tracks, especially when one factors in the fact that quite a few of them feature huge choral backing. For



folks like me who aren't especially into gaming, it's an excellent primer as to what's going on in that neck of the scoring community.

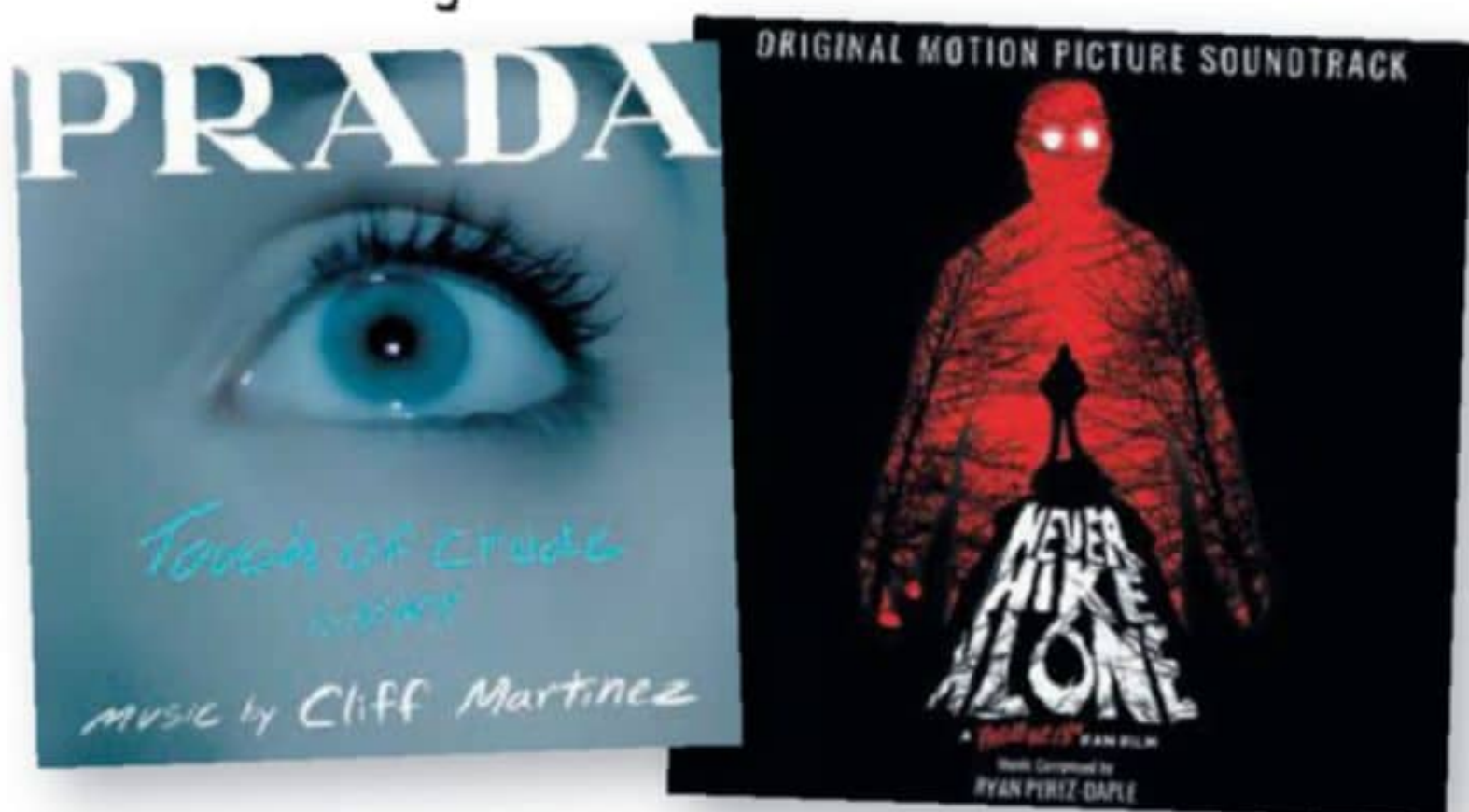
In what might be the weirdest, yet kind of coolest release of recent memory, Milan Records dropped the Cliff Martinez score for a new short film from director Nicolas Winding Refn. Entitled **Touch of Crude**, what makes this short so intriguing is that it was created as a companion for Prada's spring/summer 2023 collection. Yes, that Prada. The short film, which explores the lives of women and the scope of fluid modern femininity, was commissioned by Miuccia Prada and Raf Simons, who invited Refn to conceive an experience around the SS23 collection as an opportunity for observation between two creative spheres. Needless to say, Martinez's score for a Refn short tied to the world of fashion has a bit in common with his score for **The Neon Demon**, in that there's some really banging dance beats contrasted with gorgeously ethereal chiming, making **Touch of Crude** – in which a woman moves into a new house and is visited by a mysterious entity, a Black Box, which upon peering through its peephole unlocks multiple universes, each viewed from a different woman's perspective – something that follows in the spirit of the long-running collaboration between composer and director, while also expanding upon it.

While just one track on a rather odd compilation leads us to mention it, we'd like to suggest you take the time to track down **Some Skin: A Modern Harmonic Bongo & Percussion Party**, on Modern Harmonic Records. The Sundazed Records



sub-label has put out some excellent soundtrack obscurities over the years, with quite a few scores from Nicholas Carras' B-movie oeuvre, as well as the superb Something Weird compilation records. While **Some Skin** does feature a couple Carras cuts, the reason we're suggesting snagging this on yellow vinyl or compact disc when it drops in mid-March is because somehow, somehow, the folks behind this bongo-beating compilation have managed to include Sun Ra and his Arkestra's *The Idea of the Greater Age*, from the group's space age Blaxploitation picture, **Space Is The Place**, a track that – as pointed out by Brother Cleve in his liner notes – has surprisingly never been issued on any of the hundreds of records Ra released during and after his time on Planet Earth.

The only thing which really manages to top this is pretty impressive in and of itself. Just in time for the massive rediscovery of Polish director Andrzej Żuławski via the release of his 1981 film **Possession** on horror streamer Shudder, Finders Keepers has somehow managed to unearth the bloodline of Eastern European kosmische and groundbreaking, grinding cinematic psych rock with the release of the Andrzej Korzyński score to Żuławski's 1972 film, **Diabol** (aka **The Devil**). Sourced from the elusive original master tapes with the full cooperation of the CeTA archives in Wrocław in collaboration with GAD Records, this release is a fuzzed-out, echoplex-resplendent score sure to make all but the most hard-hearted film music and stoner rock fans drool with delight.



GHOSTS OF THE FUTURE

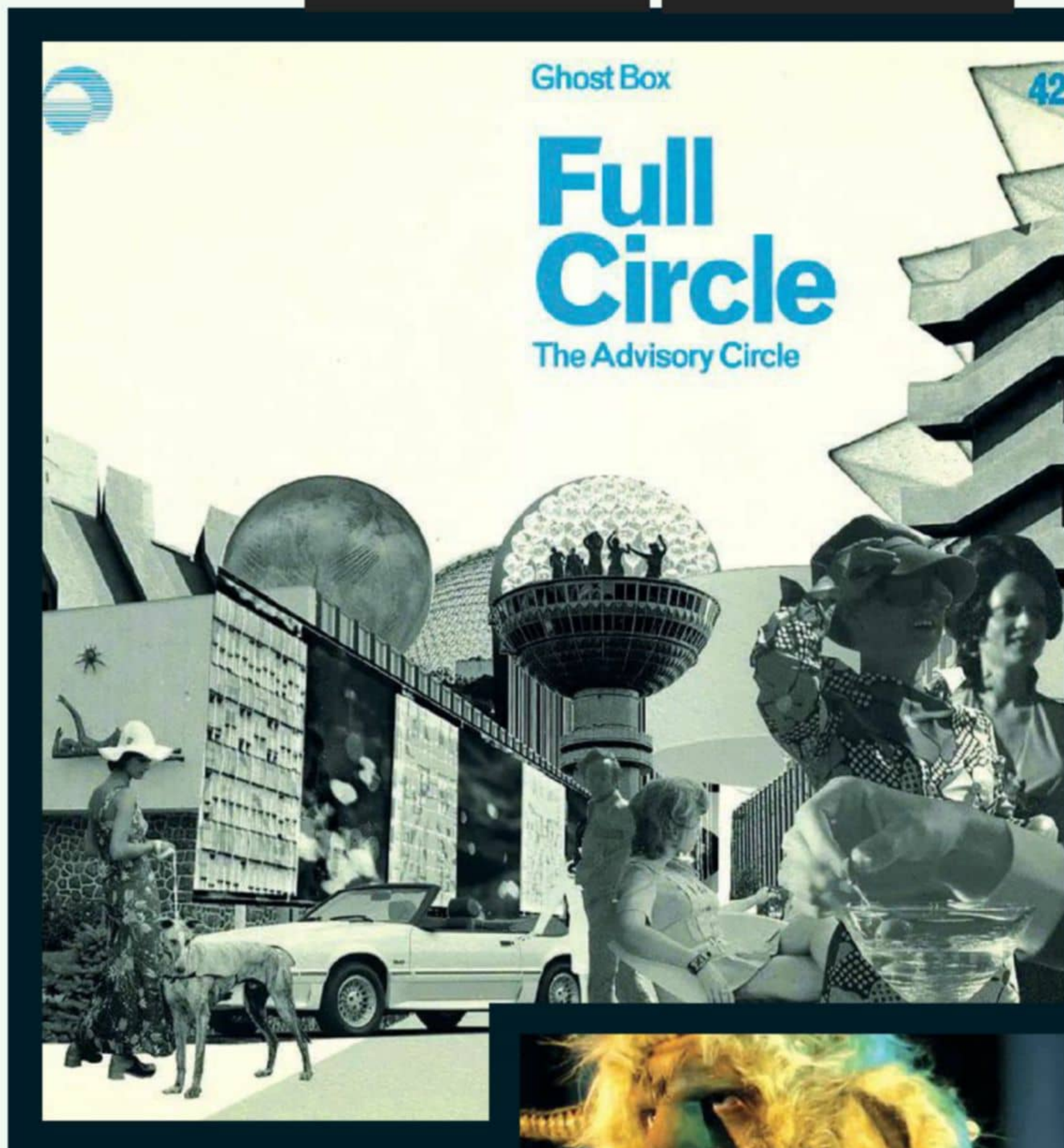
BY ALAN BOON



There's a thing growing, quiet and powerful, soundtracking the days of our lives with an ear for the echoes of the past. It doesn't have a name, and whether it needs one is missing the point; whatever you call it, the modular synthesiser music emerging from real and imaginary places is inching under the skin of an increasing number of devotees. STARBURST takes a look at this ultra-vivid scene...

Although the film and TV featured in STARBURST are usually intensely visual affairs, a decent soundtrack is just as vital for setting the tone and pace of the piece, with the likes of Michael Giacchino, Danny Elfman, and Kyle Dixon & Michael Stein becoming highly sought-after and fought over to score your Technicolor treats. There's even a small but thriving market of deluxe vinyl releases of even the most obscure cinematic offerings, lovingly put together by labels such as Geoff Barrow's Invada Records and the Death Waltz Recording Company. But what about soundtracks for films and TV shows that never existed? What about the kind of music that *would have* soundtracked such things, if they were real, or music produced to evoke a similar feeling to the visual delights that filled our brains in the 1970s and 1980s?

Over the last decade or so, a movement has been building, sparked by releases on the Ghost Box label that echoed a very British aesthetic of public information films, Open University broadcasts, library music, and wonky sci-fi soundtracks produced by the BBC Radiophonic Orchestra and others. Ghost Box quickly became tied to what writers Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds described as *hauntology*, a retro-futuristic trend borrowed from Jacques Derrida's philosophical concept that the past haunts visions of the future. Whatever you call it – and there is no agreed upon name for the resulting scene – the initial sounds of Belbury Poly, The Focus Group, and The Advisory Circle spawned a particularly evocative monster that has continued to grow, hand in hand with the revival of physical vinyl copies as artefacts

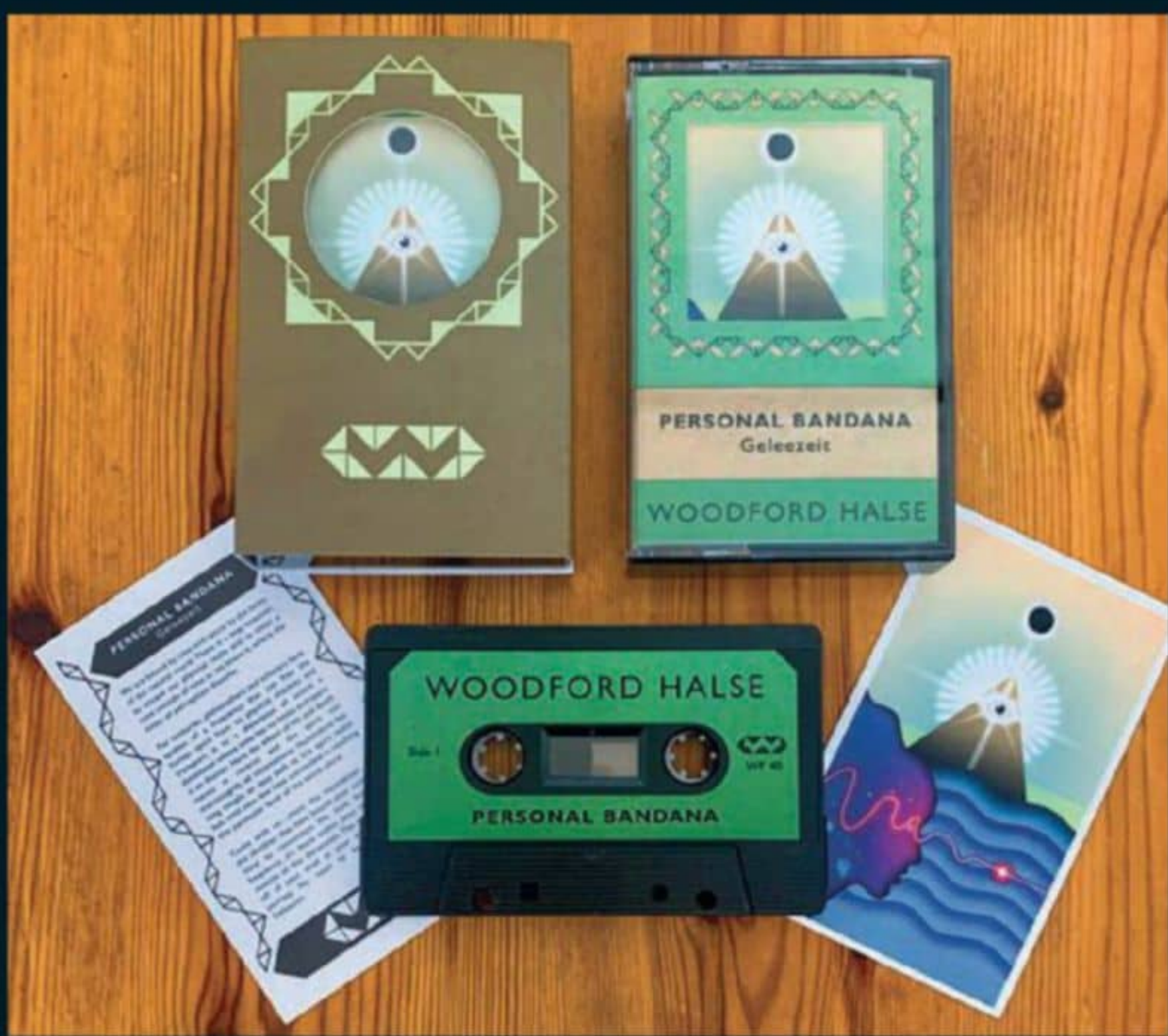


and the return of the cassette as a desirable object.

Although they are much quieter than many of the new young punks on the scene, Ghost Box continue to release definitive and innovative releases by a range of artists, with the DNA of the label threaded through a surprisingly diverse parade of sounds. Cate Brooks, who is also helping master the cult re-releases that appear on Johnny Trunk's Trunk label, is at the centre of things, a member of Pattern Forms and Belbury Poly (alongside label founder Jim Jupp), and the brain behind The Advisory Circle, whose *Full Circle* continues to arouse feelings you thought you'd left behind forty years ago.



It's a scene that remains resolutely independent, although it has occasionally broken through to the semi-mainstream with such acts as Public Service Broadcasting. Its chief exponents are labels run out of spare rooms, garages, and storage facilities, offering beautifully curated, artful, limited releases, such as those produced by the Doncaster-based Woodford Halse (named for a small village in Northamptonshire, and makers of



2022 saw them earn plaudits for the release of *The Sound of Science*, an attempt to create an educational album of the type that might have played in your primary school (if your primary school was *hip*). Produced by I Monster and All Seeing I's Dean Honer (who is also behind scene standouts *The Eccentric Research Council*), the album has sold incredibly well and earned rave reviews, something mirrored by *District Roads Open Space*, the latest album

exquisitely designed cassette releases) and Frances Castle's Clay Pipe Records, which also offers her bewitching *Stagdale* series of graphic novels, set in an ancient village in 1975 that has more than its fair share of mystery.

One of the scene's current leaders is the Biggleswade-based Castles in Space, the brainchild of Cumbrian expat Colin Morrison and named after a track by The Orb, although both castles and space neatly sum up the feelings of history and exploration threaded throughout their back catalogue. Morrison started Castles in Space in 2015, releasing an EP by Tauchsieder, which featured the vocals of Wire's Colin Neuman. Things snowballed fast, with eight releases in the first year and an eventual roster featuring such exotically mundane names as The Central Office of Information, Concretism, Field Lines Cartographer, The Home Current, and Polypores.

by Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan. On the heels of a head-turning set at the End of the Road, the LP cracked the actual album charts, nestling in at number sixty on its week of release, with the vinyl reaching number twenty on that specific chart; mainstream success tantalisingly close for an album celebrating the history of overspill estates in the industrialised North West.

Although the music does much of the visual prompting for the listener, some of the artists connected to the scene have made some playful and moving music videos to go with their songs, with the eerie short films accompanying Kayla Painter's *Efa*, *Kenopsia*, and *Sacrificial Magic*. Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan's psychoactive reuse of stock footage, and the strangely normal weirdness of Rodney Cromwell in *Opus Three* stand out as particular highlights. Cromwell might only seem tangentially attached to the scene, but his synthesiser-

driven oeuvre finds a home here, despite (or because of?) his lyrical diversions into kitchen sink mundania. The design of the releases, too, is key and it's not for nothing that Ghost Box was co-launched by graphic designer Julian House. Woodford Halse's Mat Handley handles his label's very particular look himself, as does Hardy at Clay Pipe, while Castles in Space employ the talents of Nick Taylor to give a simultaneously comforting and disquieting feel to their releases, as well as allowing the artists themselves to express their own vision through design.

Despite the pressures on vinyl production and the economic turmoil of the last few years, the scene is growing at a pleasing rate. CiS' own Levitation festival enjoyed its second outing in November 2022 (headlined by The Orb) and former *Electronic Sound* features editor Neil Mason has produced his own magazine, *Moonbuilding*, dedicated to a sound already well covered by his former magazine. Releases pertinent to fans of *this kind of thing* are also highlighted in a regular *Fortean Times* column by Bob Fischer and collected on his *Haunted Generation* website.

The Haunted Generation is a good term to describe the people attracted to the aesthetic of these sounds, an age when children were allowed to *be* children for the first time but found that the things of their childhood weren't properly catalogued or stored, as they are now. These children grew up to be adults looking to recreate their youthful experiences and have had to do it partly from memory, from feeling, employing a pattern recognition that has woven together scattered pieces of redolent, infusing, and (yes, occasionally) haunting music into a recognisable scene. And, yes, it doesn't have a name – STARBURST suggests *the unforescene* or *geistwave* as a nod to its retro-futuristic origins and *Krautrock* influence – but it doesn't need one. If it needs to find you, it will find you.

In such uncertain times, looking back to an age we understood is irresistible but can only bring diminishing returns, as the horror show of post-referendum Britain perfectly illustrates. If we can do it with a foot in the present and an eye on the future, however, it can also be progressive, and labels such as Ghost Box, Polytechnic Youth, Woodford Halse, Spun Out of Control, and Castles in Space are signposting a peculiarly backward route forward.

A curated evening of electronic music presented by CASTLES IN SPACE will take place on April 15th at Hallé St Peter's in Manchester.

MONSTERS UNIVERSITY

PART I: VAMPIRES



*Where do our screen fiends come from? What myths and folklore influence the creatures that haunt our cinematic and televisual nightmares? Each issue, **LAURA POTIER** digs for the truth behind the brutes and legends...*

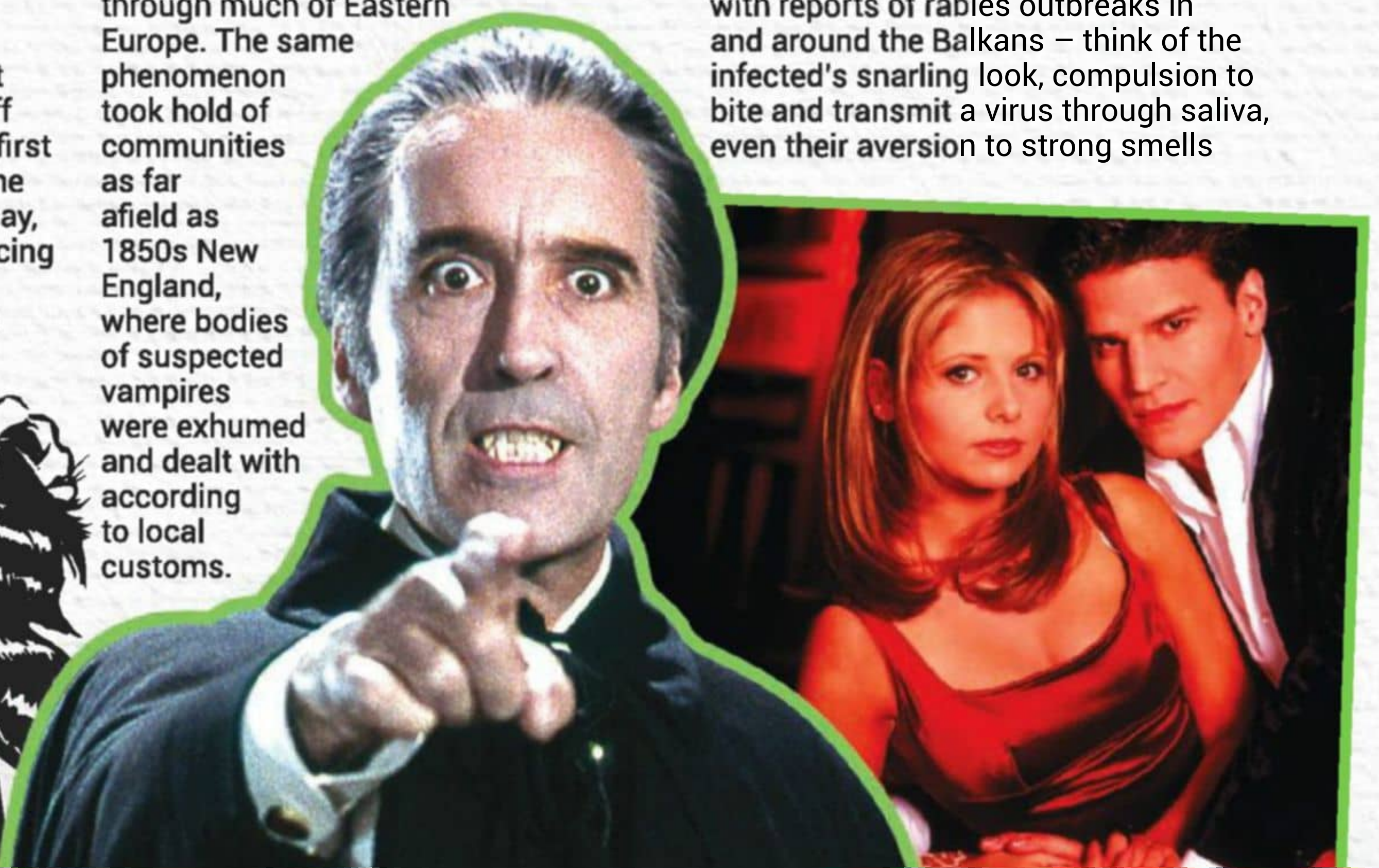
What better way to launch this column than with a creature that has become the quintessential figure in horror? Fanged, cloaked in darkness, and with a penchant for the red stuff, the vampire has stalked our nightmares for millennia. Long before Bram Stoker's *Dracula* became the poster boy for the 'no sun damage means no ageing' philosophy that still dominates today's billion-pound skincare industry, there were all sorts of undead, blood-sucking figures roaming throughout time and across the globe.

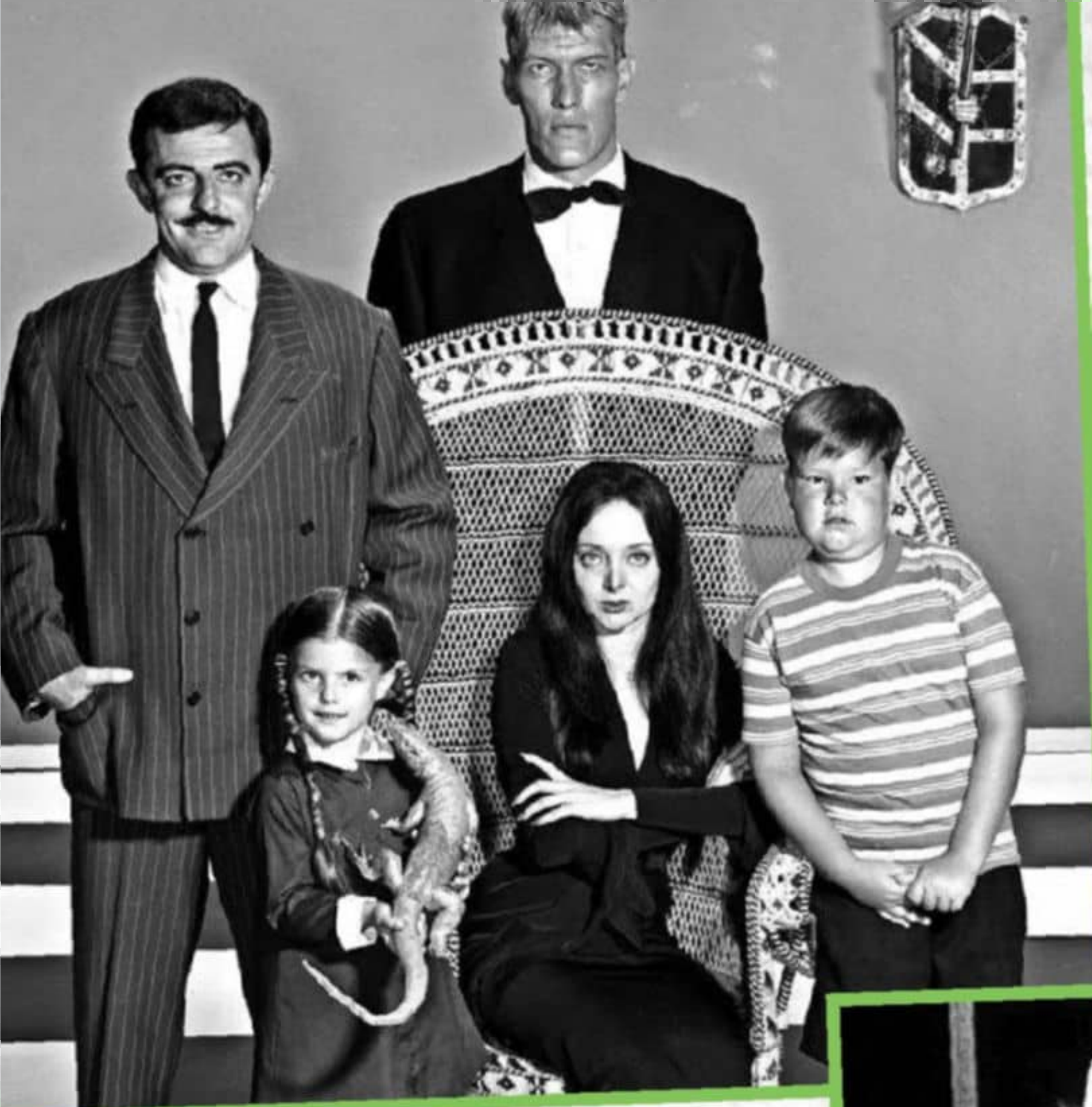
The Mesopotamians, Manipuri, Hebrews, Ancient Greeks, and Romans all had stories of demons, spirits, or even deities that drank blood or ate human flesh. Of course, that alone does not a vampire make. Think, for example, of Sekhmet: an Egyptian feline goddess associated with plague and healing, sent to earth by her father, the sun god Ra, to punish humankind's disobedience. She guzzled down a whole lot of blood on her travels, so much so that her old man had to get her blackout drunk so she'd sleep off the bloodlust. While considered the first vampiric figure by some scholars, she didn't have much in common with, say, Count Orlok. Instead, a more convincing argument locates the first vampire in early 18th-century South-eastern Europe.

Their regional folk tales had all the right ingredients: dead (or undead) folks showing signs of life, corporeal ghosts haunting relatives and draining their energy, and corpses not decaying. Vampires were usually reported to look ruddy and bloated, characteristics that were attributed to the drinking of blood, and vampiric corpses' teeth, hair, and nails would continue to grow in the grave. Today's scientific understanding may explain these factors away, but pre-industrial societies' limited understanding of sickness and posthumous decomposition meant that the vampire myth was one way of rationalising these processes. In fact, the belief in vampires in these areas was so pervasive that it saw people adopt new burial rites to ensure their loved ones didn't rise from the grave – such as staking the bodies in their coffins, stuffing stones into their mouths, or burying them with sharp objects to 'deflate' a bloated vampire – and engage in vampire hunting through much of Eastern Europe. The same phenomenon took hold of communities as far afield as 1850s New England, where bodies of suspected vampires were exhumed and dealt with according to local customs.

In many places, the existence of vampires was not a matter of superstition, but of fact. For example, historical records recount an outbreak of attacks against individuals thought to be vampires in East Prussia in 1721 and in the Habsburg Empire from 1725 to 1734. Official court cases were even brought against the corpses of Petar Blagojevich and Miloš Cečar; accused of vampirism and multiple murders in their respective villages, their bodies were thereby disinterred and staked. Witch-hunts were out, vampire hysteria was in.

The dramatic spike (pun intended) in vampire paranoia occurring at the same time as the Age of Enlightenment took hold in Europe may seem odd, but reports of vampirism coincided with unprecedented epidemics and plagues sweeping through Eastern states in the 18th and 19th centuries. Reports of vampirism rose in 1720s Hungary, for example, which coincided with reports of rabies outbreaks in and around the Balkans – think of the infected's snarling look, compulsion to bite and transmit a virus through saliva, even their aversion to strong smells





like garlic, and you have yourselves a pretty nifty vamp! As Mark Collins Jenkins writes in his book *Vampire Forensics*, even *nosferatu*, a synonym for 'vampire' first popularised in *Dracula*, supposedly stems from the Greek *nosophorus*, or 'plague carrier'. Trying to kill vampires, or prevent them from feeding, was a way for people to feel as though they had some control over disease, in much the same way as how witches were used as scapegoats for harvest failures and subsequent famines in 17th century Europe.

Such stories will undoubtedly have influenced Stoker's *Dracula*, published in 1897, as well as John William Polidori's 1819 short story *The Vampyre*. It's around then that the vampiric figure took its modern form; gone were the bloated, ruddied figures of old that evoked disease and disgust. Though drawn from those same folk legends, vampires instead became associated with the rich foreigner, the elegant figure that, although still feared, was more closely adjacent to humanity. The vampire also became a figure in which to express fears and taboos surrounding sex, sexuality, pleasure, and deviancy – one need only look at Sheridan Le Fanu's lesbian vampire novella *Carmilla*, which was published at a time when the British Empire's obsession with morality meant that

conversations around sex had to remain euphemistic.

Vampire panic died down (pun intended, again) in the 20th century – with exceptions, of course, such as the Highgate Vampire media sensation of the 1970s – as vampirism came to occupy a prominent place in pop culture and as medical knowledge improved. Vampires were now synonymous with Bela Lugosi and Christopher Lee, with Universal Monsters and Hammer Horror, with gorgeous Gothic castles and seductive power. After getting the 'tall, dark, and handsome' makeover treatment, there came the friendly and relatable vampire-next-door. This transformation of public imagination is best exemplified by the character of Barnabas Collins in ABC's after-school soap opera *Dark Shadows*, who evolves from a frightening creature of the night to the series' selfless protagonist.

Where the original vampire myth was a way to incorporate deadly diseases and infection into something that could be seen and defeated, and where the literary vampire offered a means by which to explore sexuality within a conservative society, the 'friendly vamp' provided a benign escape from the horrors of the period. Shows like *Dark Shadows*, *The Addams Family*, and *The Munsters* were a welcome distraction from the Vietnam War, the assassinations of

Civil Rights Movement leaders and of JFK, the height of the Cold War, and the other global, seismic events of the 1960s.

Closely following the quirky, kitschy, pop culture vamps of the sixties, there came a boom in supernatural fiction spearheaded by authors like Stephen King and, more directly relevant to vampires, Anne Rice. Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* and its eleven sequels forever changed audiences' relationship to the vampire by introducing a romantic and existential take on the bloodsuckers, centring a sensual, morally conflicted, brooding killer capable of love and empathy. It was Rice's conception and reinvention of the vampire myth that paved the way for some of the 21st century's most prevalent (and Young Adult-skewing) vampire stories, from Angel and Spike to Bill Compton and Eric Northman, by way of the Cullens and the Salvatores. In every one of those cases, vampirism was almost entirely relegated to a source of attraction and danger in human-vampire romances, where vampires were canonically powerful and dangerous but also vulnerable, flawed, and deeply human.

The vampire has come a long, long way from its origins as a bloated, animalistic carrier of disease... though maybe Edward 'Bedazzled' Cullen was a step too far in the opposite direction.

MONSTERS UNIVERSITY
will return next issue
with a look at
Witches!



MANGAKA MACABRE

BY ALAN BOON

Although it's tempting to think otherwise, the Japanese comic books known as manga are not a genre. They are a fully-fledged medium, embracing 'all' genres (and some that western comics overlook entirely), and it should come as no surprise that, within the world of manga, there is a considerable legacy of horror comics every bit the equal of that of EC Comics or Tomb of Dracula in the west. When it comes to manga horror, however, there is one man that stands above all, one man sure to deliver terror and unease in uncomfortable proportions, one man still producing award-winning horror manga almost forty years after breaking into the scene... JUNJI ITŌ

Born in Japan during the summer of '63, Junji Itō would become obsessed with manga from an early age, particularly the work of Kazuo Umezu and Shin'ichi Koga serialised in *Shōjo Friend*, a magazine primarily aimed at girls (and bought by his older sisters) but containing some of the best horror manga of the late 1960s. After graduating from High School, Itō trained to become a dental technician, and it was while working this job that he read about a competition in the newly established *Halloween* magazine, a monthly manga compilation designed to deliver top horror strips to eager teenage girls (and other curious onlookers). The competition – for the first Kazuo Umezu Award for young *mangaka* – would be judged by Umezu himself and Itō decided to enter purely to have the chance of his idol seeing the work he'd been doing alongside his day job.

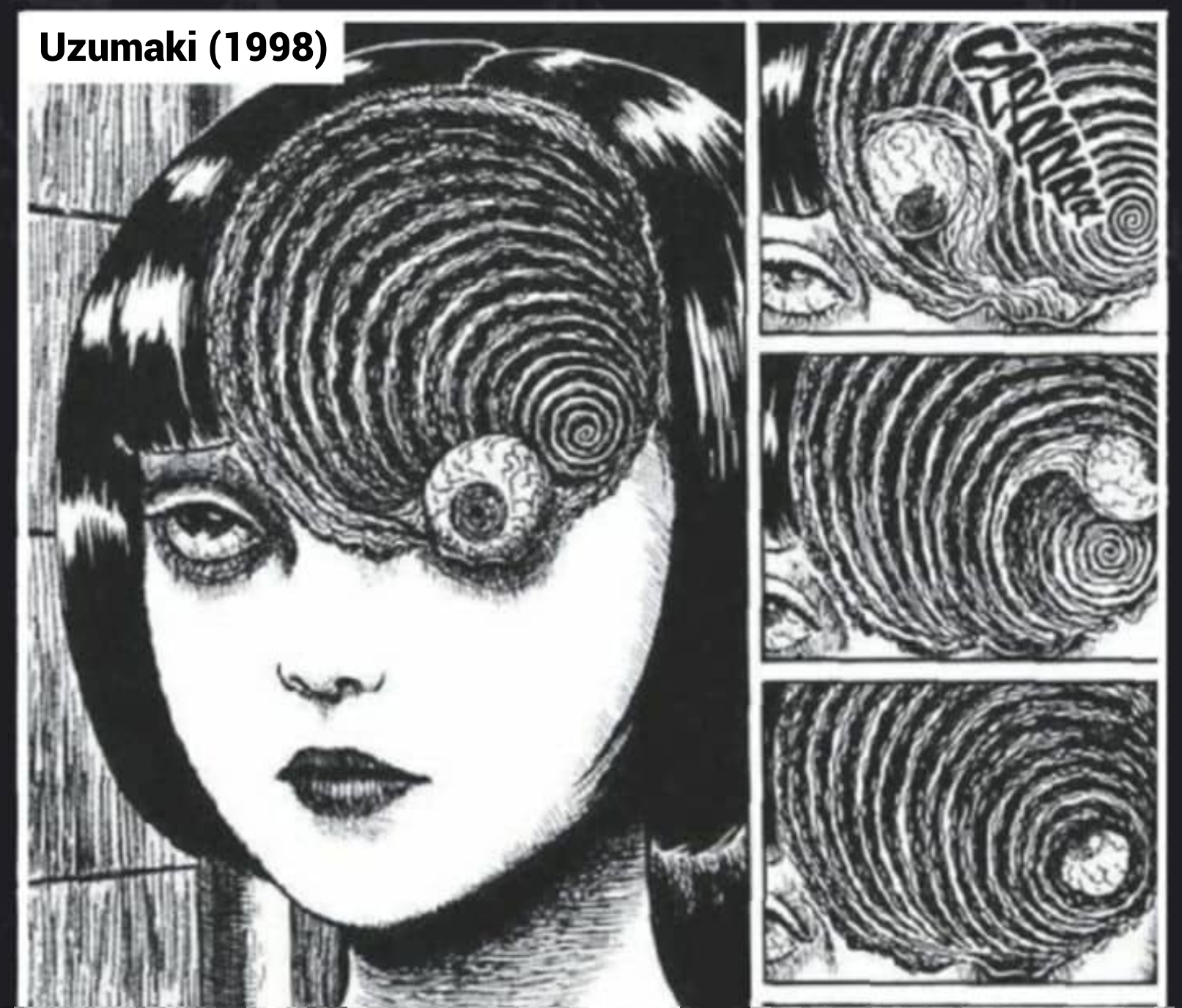
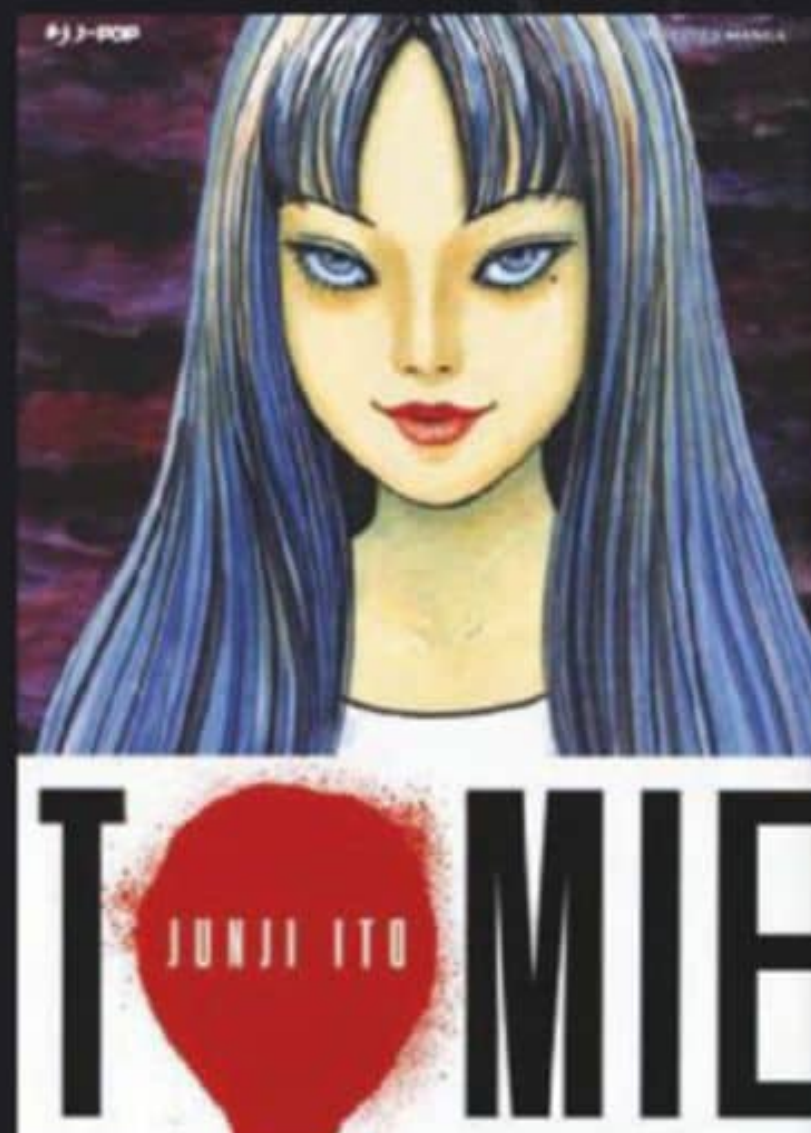
The strip that Itō submitted to *Halloween* eventually became known as *Tomie*, about a beautiful girl who bewitches those who fall in love with her into murderous rages, often becoming the target of those impulses herself but seemingly unable to die. Itō won first prize, and the strip was published in the February 1987 issue of *Halloween*, with publisher Asahi Sonorama eager for more of his work. He returned in the July issue of *Halloween* with *Bio House*, a story of a timid secretary who enjoys eating strange food, and in December with *Face Thief*, about a girl whose face changes to become like those she

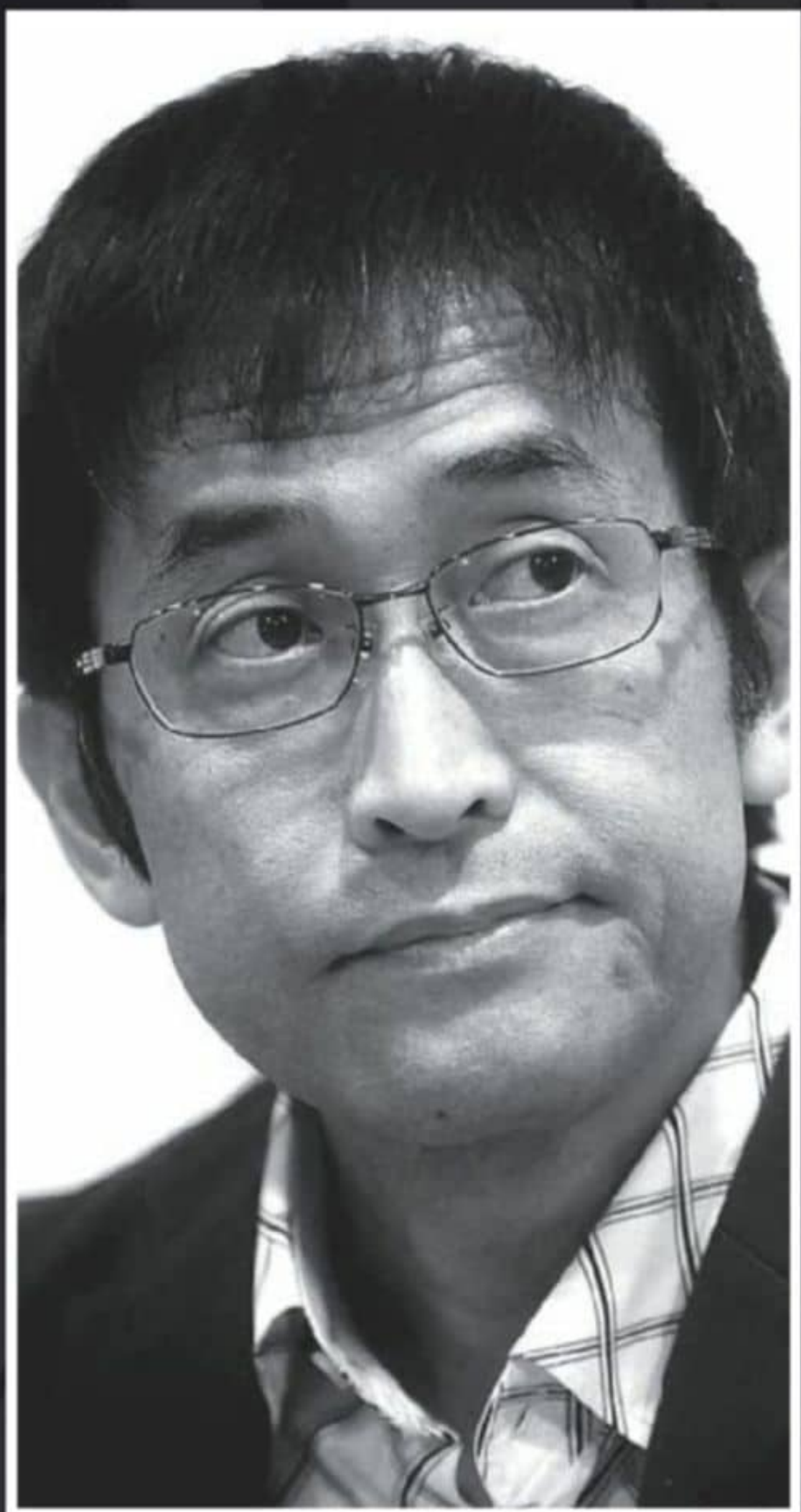
obsesses over. Pretty soon, Itō was good for four stories a year in the magazine, including a sequel to *Tomie* in August 1988, all the while combining his time as a dental technician with evenings and weekends drawing manga.

In 1990, Itō gave up his dental work to go full-time as a mangaka, and from August of that year, he appeared in every issue of *Halloween*, delivering thrills and especially chills with such stories as *Father's Heart*, *Siren Village*, and *Beehive*. In addition to further chapters in the story of *Tomie*, Itō created the character of Tōru Oshikiri, a teenage boy whose adventures in the unknown may or may not be hallucinations, following that up in August 1991 with the young troublemaker Sōichi, who always seems to find supernatural mischief to become involved in. Itō alternated these characters with one-off works

and began experimenting with longer serials, producing his own take on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in the Autumn of 1994, stretched across three issues of *Halloween*. A four-month run of Sōichi stories – collectively known as *Terror Twin* – arrived in February 1995, immediately followed by another four-month run of *Tomie* tales, with Itō clearly enjoying exploring his protagonists, but his run of stories in *Halloween* came to an end when that title was cancelled by Asahi Sonorama with the December 1995 issue.

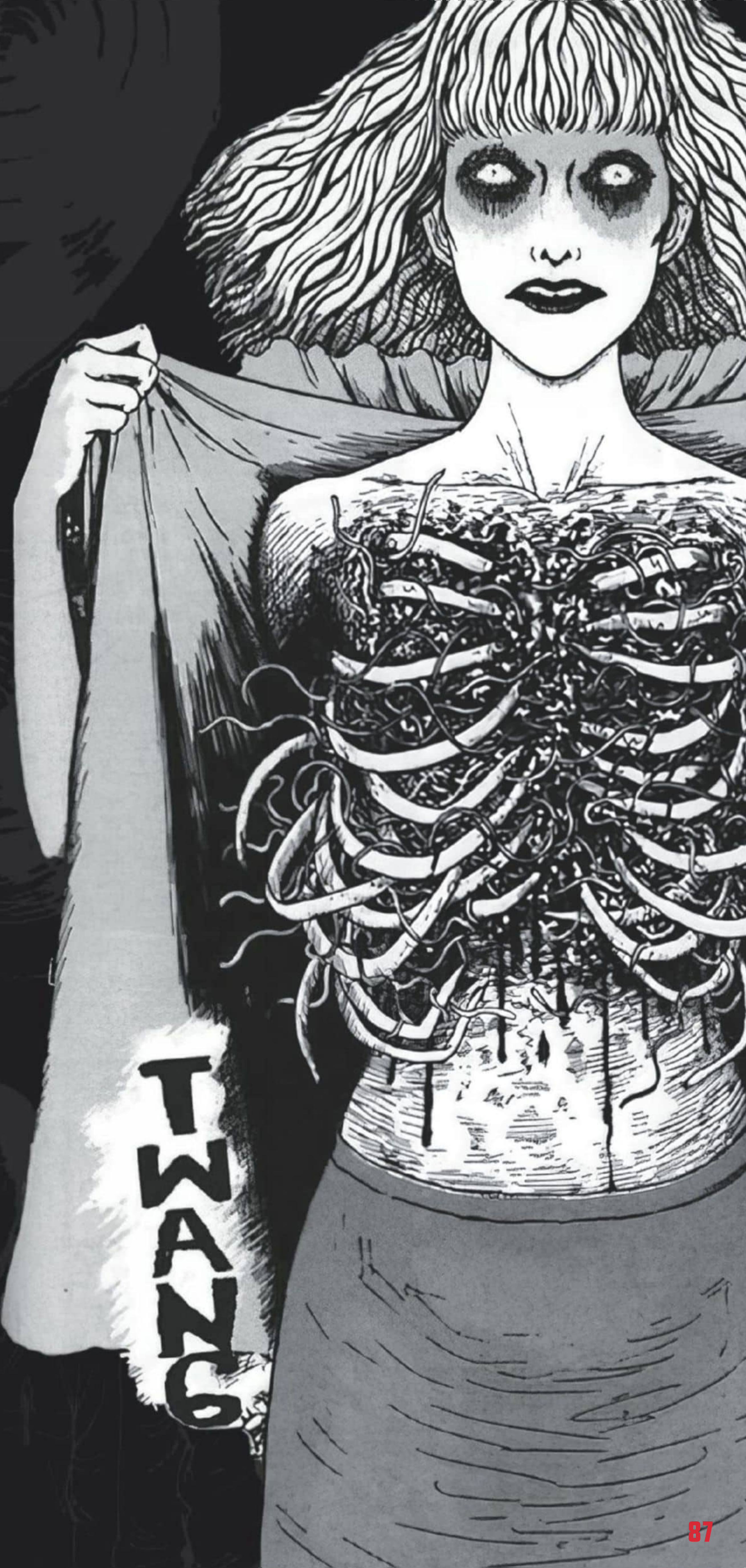
A talent such as Junji Itō doesn't sit around doing nothing, however, and his first post-*Halloween* work debuted in *Nemuki* magazine, which had been published by Asahi Sonorama as a companion title to *Halloween* since 1990 and was launched as a standalone monthly in May 1996. Later made into a movie starring former





gravure idol Risa Gotō, *Love with the Dead* was a four-part story about a girl named Midori who moves back to her old hometown and begins having nightmares that may be connected to the strange suicide of a classmate and a mysterious fortune teller. Rather than fire off work at his previous rate, Itō began taking time between serials to ensure he hit the heights of his earlier work and the December 1996 issue of *Nemuki* was bereft of his horror tales. Regular readers needn't have worried, though, because January brought *Junji's Screaming Comics*, a five-part collection of eerie short stories that sated even the thirstiest reader.

After that, though, his work in *Nemuki* was spotty, graduating to a slot in the weekly *Big Comic Spirits* published by Shōgakukan and aimed at young adult men, or *seinen*. *Uzumaki* – or 'Spiral' – appeared in eighty-five weekly episodes from February 1998 to September 1999, later collected into three volumes. It tells the story of high schooler Kirie Goshima and the small town where she lives, a place plagued by curses and strange goings on involving spirals. *Uzumaki* was immediately optioned for adaptation into a live-action movie, something that had already happened with *Tomie* the year before. The *Tomie* movie was less a straight interpretation of Itō's work, however, as director Ataru Oikawa sought to create something new using the *Tomie* stories *Photograph* and *Kiss* as his inspiration. With the approval of Itō, Oikawa crafted what he called "a fairy tale in bad taste," with





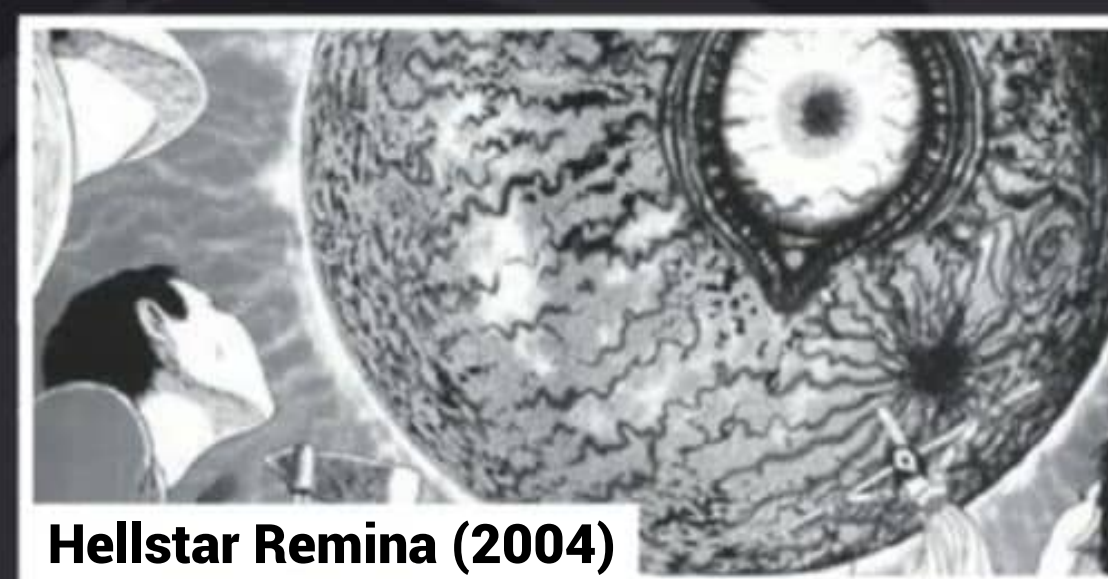
Tomie Unlimited (2011)



Slug Girl (2018)



Crossroads Fortune (2018)



Hellstar Remina (2004)



Gyo (2001)

former pop idol Miho Kanno cast in the title role. Fans of *Tomie* consider it an alternative sequel to the original work and it was followed in 1999 by a direct-to-video sequel, *Tomie: Another Face*, this time with Runa Nagai in the title role.

The *Uzumaki* movie was released on February 11th, 2000, and paired with another instalment of the live-action Tomie series, *Replay*. *Uzumaki* was the work of first-time director Akihiro Higuchi (under the *nom-de-guerre* Higuchinsky). The director had his own tentative plans for an *Uzumaki* movie in the works when he learned that Itō was looking for a director. Made in two weeks in the summer of 1999, Higuchi wanted the film to stay as faithful as possible to Itō's manga but had to make some accommodations since the serial had yet to finish its run in *Big Comic Spirits*. The result, with Eriko Hatsune as Kirie Goshima, was generally favourable but the consensus was that Higuchi had failed to translate the scariness of Itō's work to the screen, although he delivered creepiness in spades.

More adaptations followed, with *Oshikiri* receiving the live-action treatment in 2000, and a further six instalments in the Tomie series, including 2007's *Tomie vs Tomie* and ending with *Tomie Unlimited* in 2011. That was also the year Itō was given the opportunity to direct his own movie, one of three by famous mangaka that also featured long-time influence Shin'ichi Koga. That film, *Tomio*, told a chilling tale of

a young couple in love and planning a marriage, only for a beautiful fortune teller to tell them that Tomio is destined to spend his life with another woman. From there, the story spirals into unfaithfulness, curses, and lots – and lots – of beheadings, with Itō's twisted graphics translating into some disgusting body horror in a delightful oddity of a film.

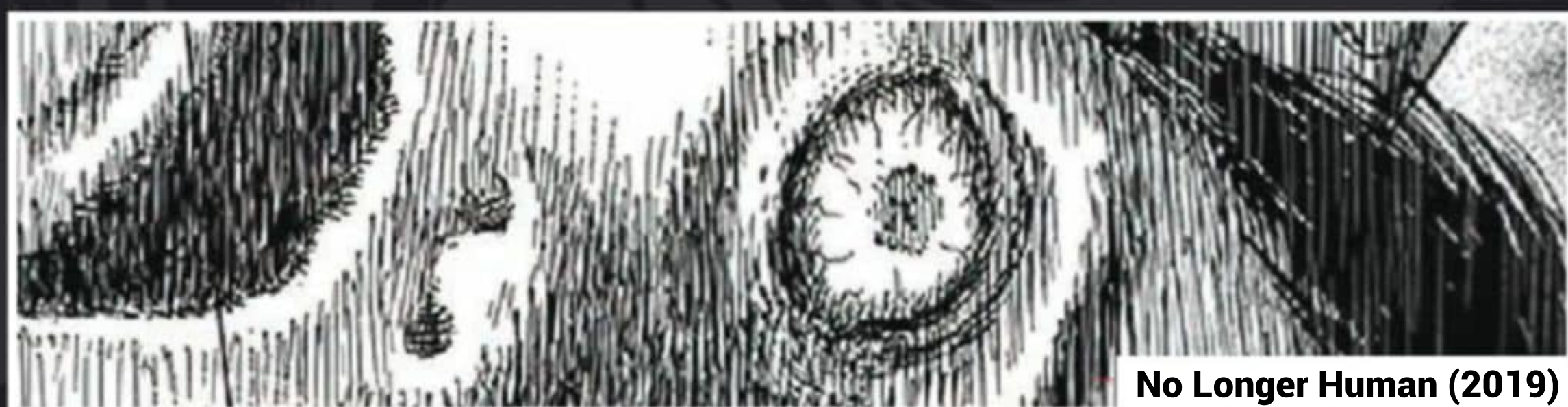
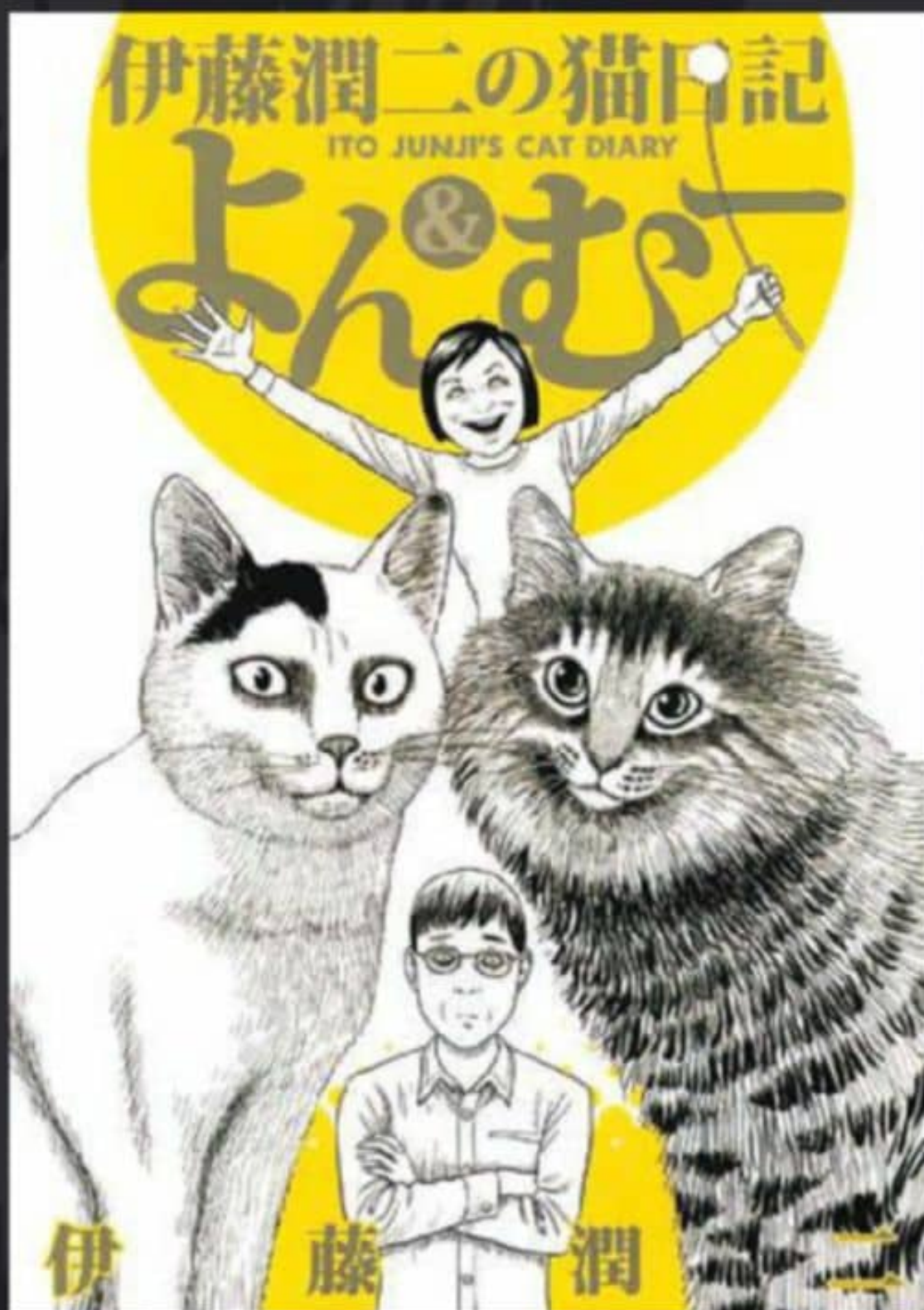
Itō also found his work in demand from television, and some of his stories appeared in the anthology series *Melody of Drama* as early as 1991. In July 2000, a four-part omnibus called *Junji Itō Fear Collection* debuted on TV Asahi, adapting *Long Dreams*, *Face Thief*, *Oshikiri*, and *Gravetown*, accompanied by home video versions of *The Long Hair in the Attic*, *The Hanging Balloons*, and *The Devil's Logic*. The *anime* industry, perhaps with an eye on the gory horror of Itō's tales, was slow to come to the Junji party but fishy horror *Gyo* was adapted by Ufotable in 2011 as an original video animation, with 2018's *Junji Itō Collection* finally getting around to some of the author's most famous stories. Produced by Studio Deen, the twelve-episode series was a greatest hits of Itō's work and was followed by an OVA of *Tomie*, providing a one-stop anime showcase for the best of the author's twisted inventory.

While all this cinematic and televisual business was going on, Junji Itō continued to produce manga, and

although he was not churning out stories at the incredible rate of his early days in the industry, his output remained steady and inventive. To accompany the *Tomie* movie, Itō reworked his best-known work for *Nemuki*, producing seven chapters that ran between November 1999 and November 2000, interspersed with the short stories that had become his trademark and that were collected in heavy volumes periodically re-released and added to. In December 2001, the twenty-two-part *Gyo* began in *Big Comic Spirits*, the story of a town under attack from unstoppable fish-like creatures with metal legs that are attracted by a 'death stench'.

It's safe to say that Itō was in fine form and his next long-form piece – *Hellstar Remina* – arrived in September 2004, serialised over six issues of *Big Comic Spirits Casual*, a companion title to the weekly. *Remina* was both the name of an approaching heavenly object and the daughter of the man who discovered it. When the celestial *Remina* threatens Earth's existence, it has ramifications for its namesake. Itō was inspired by a suggestion from *Uzumaki*'s editor Ichiro Nakamura to tell a story of 'stars eating stars' and *Hellstar Remina* was his first real venture into science fiction, albeit filtered through his usual warped lenses.

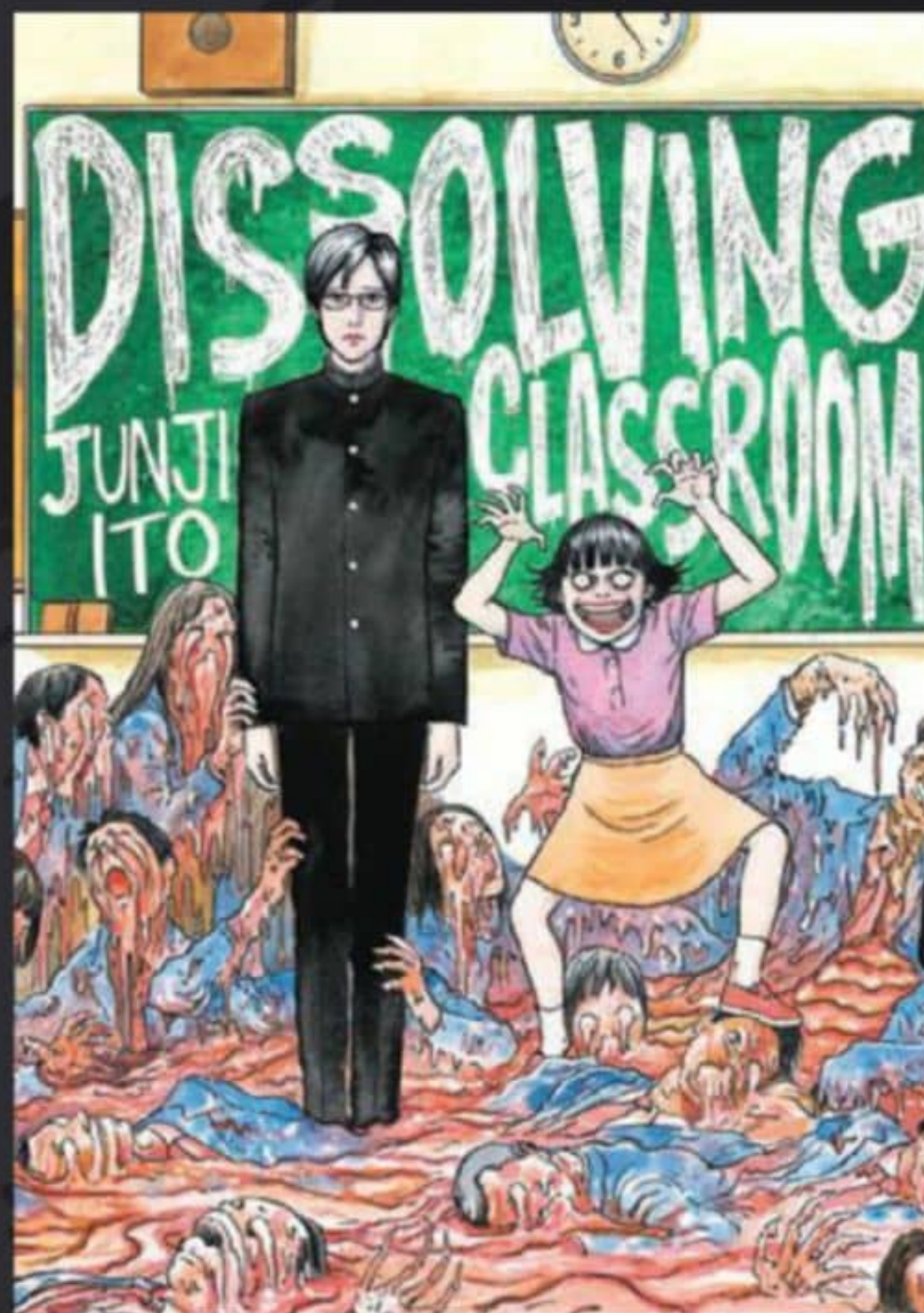
2007's *Black Paradox*, again serialised in *Big Comic Spirits Casual*, focused on four people who meet on a suicide



website, their search for a perfect death interrupted by the discovery of a gateway to the afterlife and a mysterious substance that could change the world as we know it. Riven with trademark Itō twists, it delighted his usual audience. That may not have been the case when *Junji Itō's Cat Diary* arrived in 2008 with a series of short stories about his feline companions, Yon and Mu, and the joy – and problems – they bring into the life of his thinly-veiled stand-in, J-kun, switching between a grounded domestic style and his usual horrific illustrations for flights of fantasy.

In 2010, Itō adapted someone else's work for the first time since *Frankenstein*, drawing *Rasputin the Patriot* from Takashi Nagasaki's script, based on the story of Masaru Satō, a Japanese diplomat who spent his early career in the Soviet Union and was later accused of espionage. He was back behind the typewriter and drawing board for 2013's *Dissolving Classroom*, serialised in *More!* magazine through that title's end in October 2014. *Dissolving Classroom*'s principal characters were Keikō and Yuma, the latter of whom hides a terrible secret as the reason he constantly apologises. A love story with added beheadings and, well, *dissolvings*, the only word that could accurately describe the work was Itō-esque...

Itō turned adaptor once again in 2017 with *No Longer Human*, a manga serialisation of Osamu Dazai's final



novel, a semi-autobiographical story of a suicidal man that was taken by some to be Dazai's final statement on his life, a life he ended when he jumped into a river in a suicide pact with his lover, a woman named Tomie Yamazaki. Itō's version was the fourth adaptation of a classic work and included Dazai as a character, finishing with the author's suicide told from the perspective of the novel's main character. By contrast, Itō's most recent multi-piece work – 2018's *Sensor* – took on a cosmic scale, favourably compared to the work of H.P. Lovecraft but disappointing long-time fans of the *auteur*.

Itō remains an active mangaka, currently working on *The Liminal Zone*, a collection of shorter stories exploring familiar themes, a return to his former glories after the experimental tone of *Sensor*. In January of 2023, Netflix showcased some of Itō's most chilling tales in an animated series titled *Maniac*, with the likes of Tomie and Sōichi appearing and classic tales like *The Hanging Balloons* and *Flotsam* appearing on the docket. With a full suite of his works available in translation from VIZ Media, there's never been a better time to dive into the dark and distorted world of Junji Itō. Just make sure you tie a rope securely around your waist to help you get back out... ✦

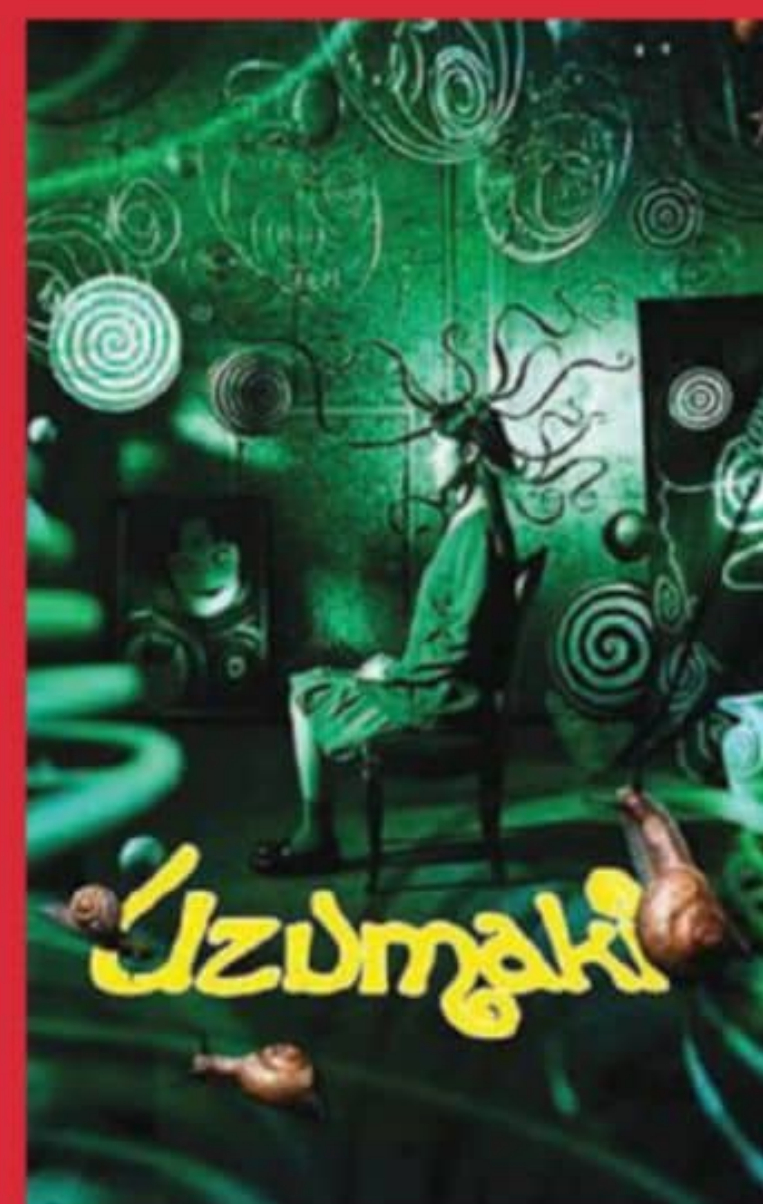
The next volume in the JUNJI ITŌ STORY COLLECTION from VIZ Media is TOMBS, and will be released in hardback on May 11th.

UZUMAKI

Although *Tomie*, inspired by the childhood death of one of his classmates, has long been considered Junji Itō's magnum opus, it is *Uzumaki* – or *Spiral* – that often appears in many considerations of the *mangaka*'s best work. The story grew out of Itō's desire to craft a tale based on his upbringing in a traditional, long terraced Japanese house, discovering while working through the concept that such a building could be made longer if it were to spiral. Focusing on teenager Kirie Goshima and her boyfriend Shuichi Satō, the pair discover the myriad ways that spirals curse their hometown, with Shuichi's parents having killed themselves from the physical and psychological effects of coming into contact with the town's many twists. Kirie herself becomes a victim of the curse, and the pair try to flee the town and its dark miasma, but nothing is ever simple in the world of Junji Itō, and they find themselves drawn back into its infinitesimal helter-skelter.

Uzumaki was adapted for a live-action film in 2000 and featured in a pair of videogames released the same year. It was nominated for an Eisner Award in 2003 – Itō's first nomination for an award he would eventually win in 2019 for *Frankenstein* – and appeared in the list of *1001 Comics You*

Must Read Before You Die, but it lacks the notoriety of *Tomie*, which has been constantly refreshed by new adaptations and the author periodically returning to that world. In 2019, however, [adult swim] announced they had commissioned a four-part animation, produced in association with Japanese studio Production IG. Initially scheduled for a 2021 release, the anime has been delayed by production issues, but it is hoped that it will see the light of day this year, finally – alongside the recently released anthology series *Maniac* on Netflix – bringing Itō's work the spotlight it deserves.



BABBLE BEYOND THE STARS

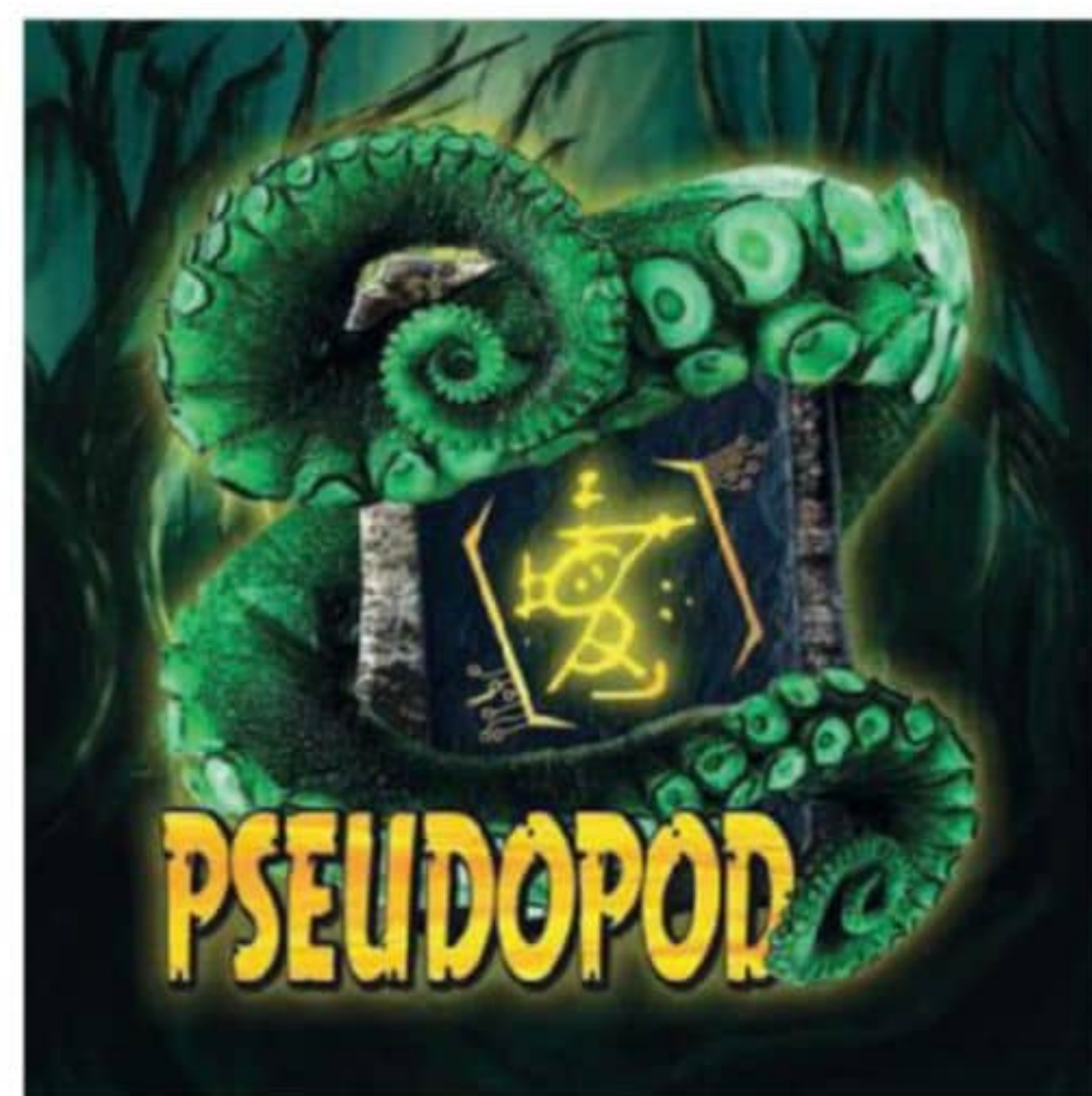
I didn't even have an iPod or anything like that; I used to listen sat at my desk. Then one day, they announced

they were doing a horror podcast. I listened to that for a couple of years, and eventually one of the hosts announced they were stepping down. In the least British moment I have had in my life, I emailed them and said "I would really love to work with you." I came aboard at PseudoPod and have never looked back!

ESCAPE POD



Alasdair Stuart



Aside from podcasting, what are your cultural touchstones?

I'm into everything, and I think that's why the podcasts appeal to me so much. I've done a lot of work in tabletop games, tabletop RPGs, and video games, and that crosses a lot of different genres. I've written for the Doctor Who, Primeval, and Star Trek RPGs, and I've also done a lot in independent spaces. What really

Welcome to our regular podcasting column, in which we spotlight the very best in ear-based entertainment! This time, we're talking to ALASDAIR STUART, co-owner of ESCAPE ARTISTS PODCASTS, providers of story-based pods PSEUDOPOD, PODCASTLE, and ESCAPE POD...

STARBURST: Can you tell our readers a bit about you and your shows?

Alasdair Stuart: I'm a voice actor, game designer, and pop culture journalist, and at the core of all that is Escape Artists Podcasts, which at 18 years old is the longest-running genre fiction network in the western world! I've been the host of PseudoPod for fifteen of those years. The best place to find out about us is

escapeartists.net, which is a hub for the five shows that we do. Each one has the same basic format – there's an introduction, a story read by a narrator, and a conclusion. The oldest show is Escape Pod, which does sci-fi, then PseudoPod does horror, and PodCastle does fantasy.

What got you into podcasting?

I'll tell you my secret origin story... I listened to Escape Pod on a green iMac plugged into the wall via a telephone socket in a dark, damp house right after I graduated from university. In the wild west of the early Internet, I stumbled upon it and really liked it. This was still dial-up, so a twenty-minute episode took about twenty minutes to download.



HIGHLIGHTING THE BEST IN GENRE PODCASTING WITH LUKE SPAFFORD

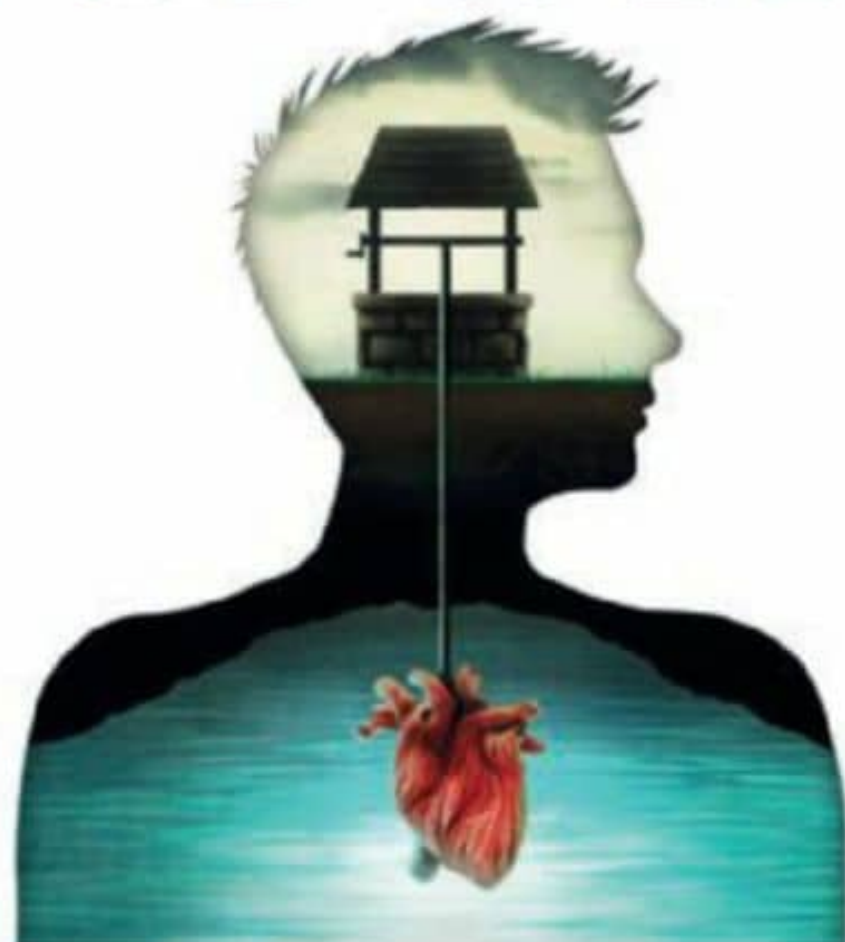
attracts me, which transcends medium or genre even, is things that I can get enthusiastic about. I was a stage magician as a teenager and I ended up moving into the production side of it as I was going to university. The thing that stage magic does for you when it comes to fiction is it gives you an entirely new perspective. Not just what's done, but how it's done. There's an incredible love for not only the craft, but for the journey. That, mixed with the work I did in comics, left me with a tremendous appreciation of how story is built and how you can tell a story that's in every way predictable and built from bricks used a thousand times before, but – if you build it right – there's still a huge amount of worth to it. The perspective an author or creator brings to a story is as important as the perspective we bring. That's where things get interesting – the intersecting of what the creator brings and what the listener brings. Escape Artists hold that as a value – our motto is "one story, told well". Being able to send these stories out into the world and have people interact with them is one of the most incredibly privileged things I get to do. That defines my cultural touchstones; it's something I can get excited about.

What podcasts are you listening to?

All sorts! I'm a huge audio drama fan and I'm listening to The White Vault, about five scientists sent to a remote research facility, which then turns into a globe-trotting horror. I love Red Valley, which is about to come back for its third season – that's an incredibly funny and horrifying tale about an accountant



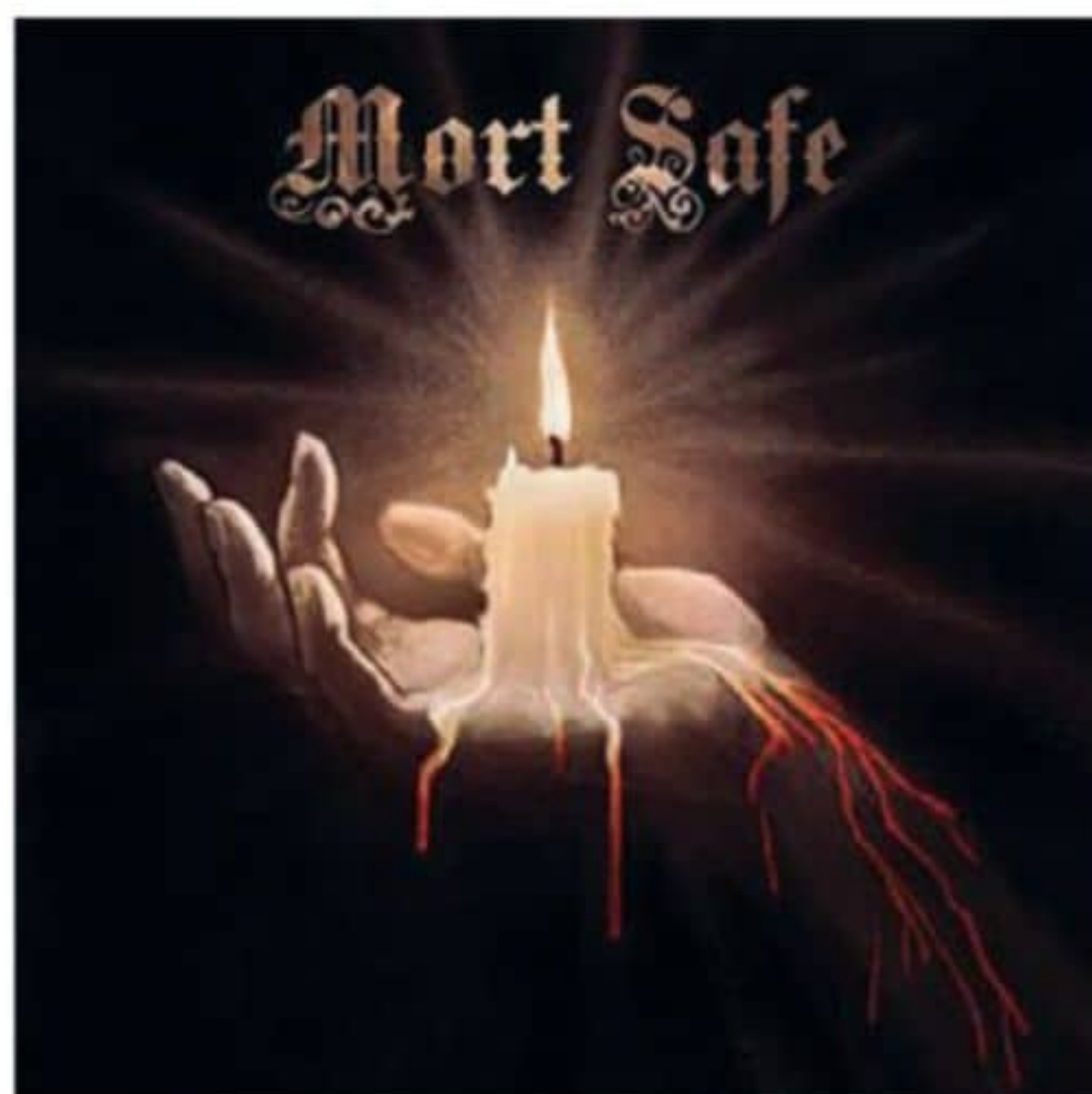
THE WELL



chasing down something he can't put his finger on, which turns into a Brazil-like conspiracy. I'm also a big fan of The Well, Anson Mount's podcast about pop culture.

Could you tell us about your work in voice acting and game design?

I'll start with my voice work, which I've been doing for about a decade. The thing that got me noticed was Season Four of The Magnus Archives. My character was the villain of the piece, but if you ask me, he was the unsung hero. Since then, I've diversified quite a bit. In the last year, I've done a horror show, a show called Super Suits, and, most recently, a spaceship disaster show. I tend to be cast as villains, so it's been nice to play different characters. I've recently been cast in a new Scottish Victorian horror show called Mort Safe. I don't believe in bucket lists, but if I did, I would have one less item, because I have always wanted to play the well-meaning but arrogant Victorian scientist who explains to our idiot hero just how screwed he is! The vast majority of my

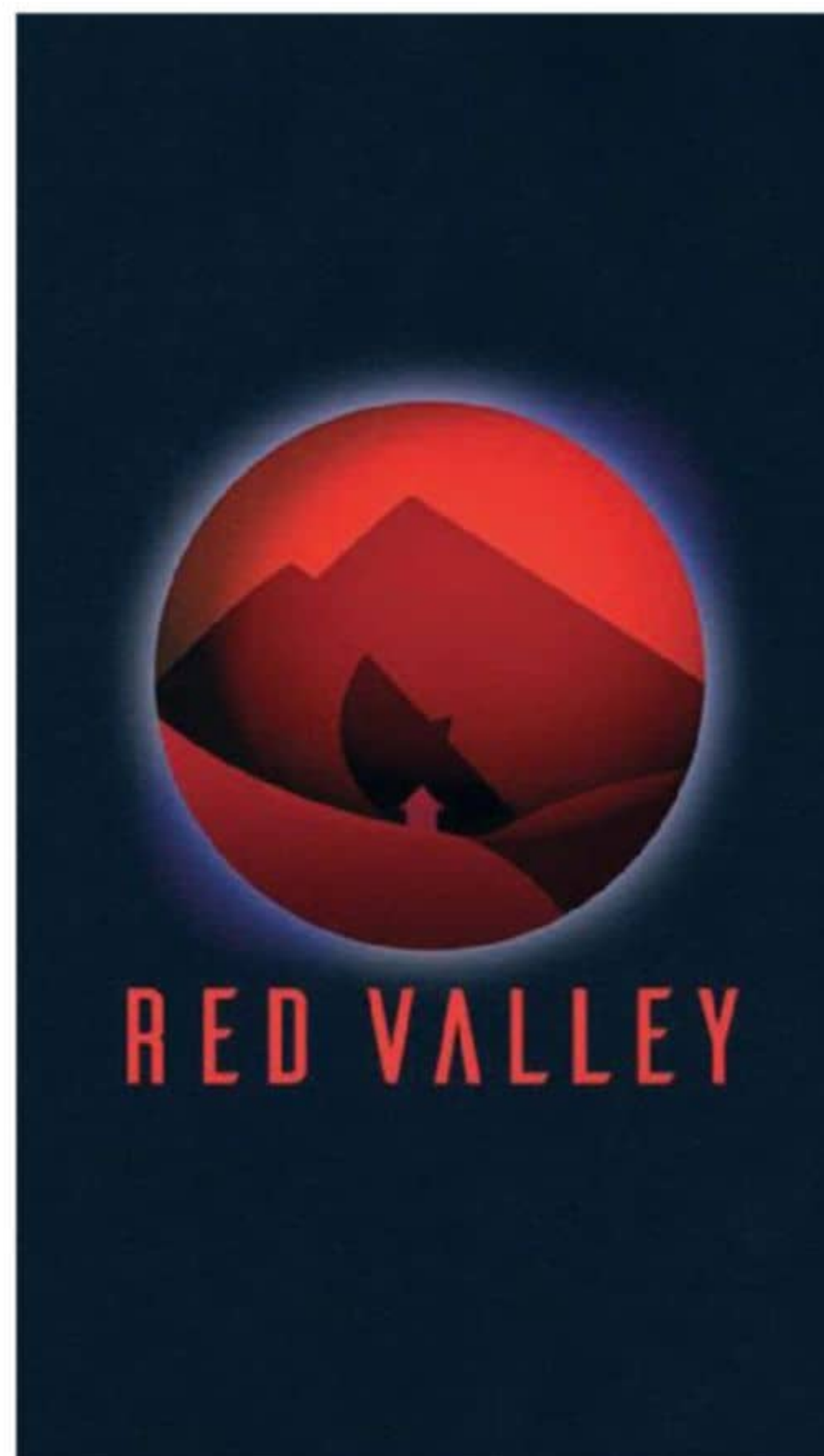


game design has been tabletop RPGs. I was the sole writer on The Sixth Doctor Sourcebook, and lead writer on The Tenth Doctor Sourcebook and a Star Trek module, alongside some smaller franchises.

What's next for you in the world of podcasting?

I've lots of roles coming up, most of which I can't talk about, unfortunately. I have a novella to write and I'm ready to start my next tabletop RPG job.

All of Alasdair's podcasts can be found at [ESCAPEARTISTS.NET](https://escapeartists.net) or via your usual podcast app of choice.



TOY STORIES

STARBURST made the trek to LONDON TOY FAIR to report on what terrific toys and movie merchandise us collectors can lay our hands on this coming year...



by Ed Fortune

What nothing quite prepares you for when it comes to London Toy Fair is just how big it is. Many of the stalls are walled off in their own booths (in order to draw you in) so it's easy to get lost amidst the many weird and wonderful toys on display. Though it's an industry and press only event, it's still every bit as delightful as the name promises. Yes, it might be more about the business side of toys, but you're still going to bump into all sorts of mascots (the Pokémon were particularly delightful, though we didn't catch them all!).

A highlight was visiting the Bandai stand. The company always has something bizarre and wacky to tempt us with, stocking everything from the top anime, to tie-in models for the likes of *Stranger Things* and *The Witcher*, as well as classics such as *Star Trek*, with delights such as a full prop phaser and a model Enterprise being their most recent offerings. There are also *My Hero Academia*-themed exercise watches, for those of you who intend to become the hero you want to be! Bandai also has the rights to McFarlane Toys, and they have a lot of *Batman* coming to a toy shelf near you. In the UK, 'build your own' and painting kits are mostly the domain of Games Workshop, Airfix, and Revell, however Bandai intends to start releasing its own widely

popular *Gunpla* kits across the UK very soon. These iconic robots are fun to assemble and paint, but tricky to find, until now, apparently, as many more are in production. Speaking of Revell, the model kit company certainly seems to want to entice STARBURST readers this year, with the launch of both classic *Return of the Jedi* and *James Bond* kits.

Never one to miss out on the action, LEGO was also there. Unfortunately, we only got to feast our eyes on a small number of new products, the rest were shuttered away from even the mightiest STARBURST journalist! Still, we saw a pretty cool TIE Bomber from the *Star Wars* range and *Avatar: The Way of Water* has some great-looking builds, including a mech suit and a giant whale thing.

The Playmobil stand was a lot more rewarding. We love their *Star Trek* range (the Klingon Bird of Prey is adorable) and they're stretching out into anime with a range of *Naruto* models in individual boxes, and a whole range of *Asterix* figures that includes the Egyptian adventures. The German company is also slowly growing their fantasy and sci-fi ranges, with magical fire horses, cyber-enhanced dinosaurs, and a cool Space Shuttle coming to toyshops soon.

Board games-wise, Ravensburger are doubling down on their movie tie-in games. They've already produced delights such as *Jaws* and *Alien*, as well as storybook games based on novels such as *The Princess Bride*. We got to play with their *Lord of the Rings* game,



and it has a real feel of both the movie and the book.

Exploding Kittens had some fun stuff to share with us, including a massive throwable taco of all things! Their games are simple and family-friendly. We found the word shouting game *Really Loud Librarians* particularly enjoyable and strangely relaxing, given how busy the site was.

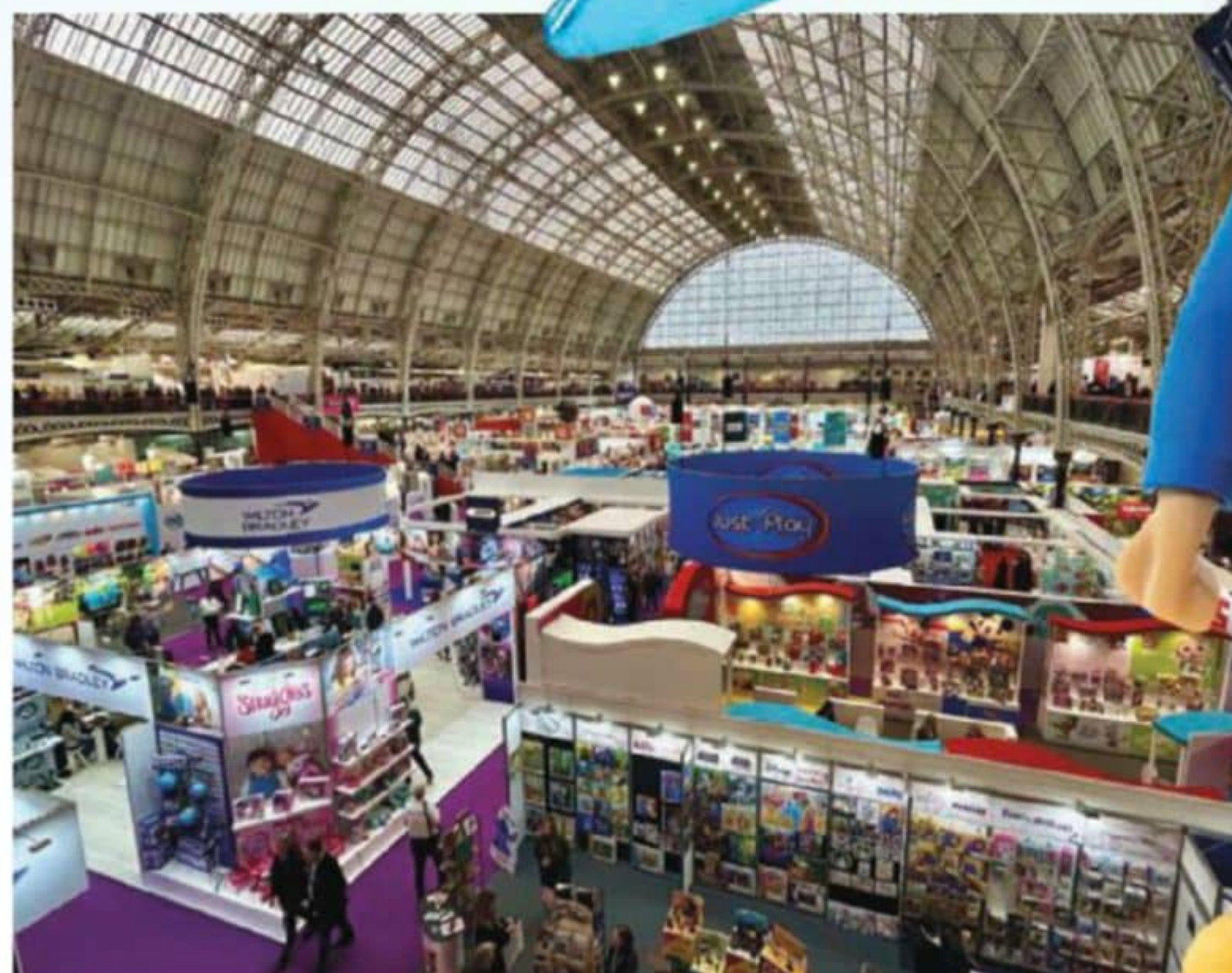
We were also welcomed by Funko, whose fun-filled catalogue includes the *Ted Lasso* board game, and a *Jurassic World* game called *The Legacy of Isla Nublar*. They also do *Rear Window*, the board game of the Hitchcock movie. It's a fabulous game in our humble opinion and fascinating to play. They've also got a new version of *Cranium* coming out which seems to have everything you'd want from the game whilst zhuzhing it up a little for the modern player. Oh, and so, so many Funko Pops. They are absolutely one to watch this year.

Hachette Boardgames are also a bit of a hidden treasure trove; bringing indie Eurogames to the UK, everything from space exploration games to a rather charming one about a ghost mouse. Absolutely one to watch if you're a board game geek.

In general, we saw a lot of new merchandise pushing classic Disney brands, especially *Mickey Mouse*, who turns 100 this year. *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* also got a lot of love; expect to see toys and games (as well as some classics) return as the new *Mutant Mayhem* movie comes out in August. It may well be the return of Turtlemania. *Star Wars* is still getting a lot of attention, of course, especially the Original Trilogy characters, and although we didn't see much of

Hasbro at the fair (they had a trade-only stand), we did see plenty of *Transformers* merch. We also noticed a distinct lack of new *Harry Potter* merch, and what was there was mostly aimed at the very young. Make of that what you will!

Will you be adding any of these to your collections? Let us know on our social channels or drop us a line at letters@starburstmagazine.com





by Mo

EACH ISSUE, WE TAKE A BREAK FROM FICTION TO INVESTIGATE SOME OF THE REAL-WORLD PHENOMENA THAT OFTEN SERVE AS INSPIRATION FOR OUR IMAGINATIONS...

THE RISE OF AI

Artificial intelligence has come a long way in recent years, with advancements in machine learning and natural language processing leading to the development of increasingly sophisticated AI systems. These systems are able to perform a wide range of tasks, from analysing data to providing customer service and even driving cars.

The rise of AI can be traced back to the 1950s, when researchers began exploring the use of computers to perform tasks that normally require human intelligence, such as learning and problem-solving. In the following decades, AI research focused on developing algorithms that could enable computers to perform specific tasks, such as playing chess or recognising speech.

However, it wasn't until the 21st century that AI began to make significant strides in terms of practical applications. The development of machine learning algorithms, which enable computers to learn and



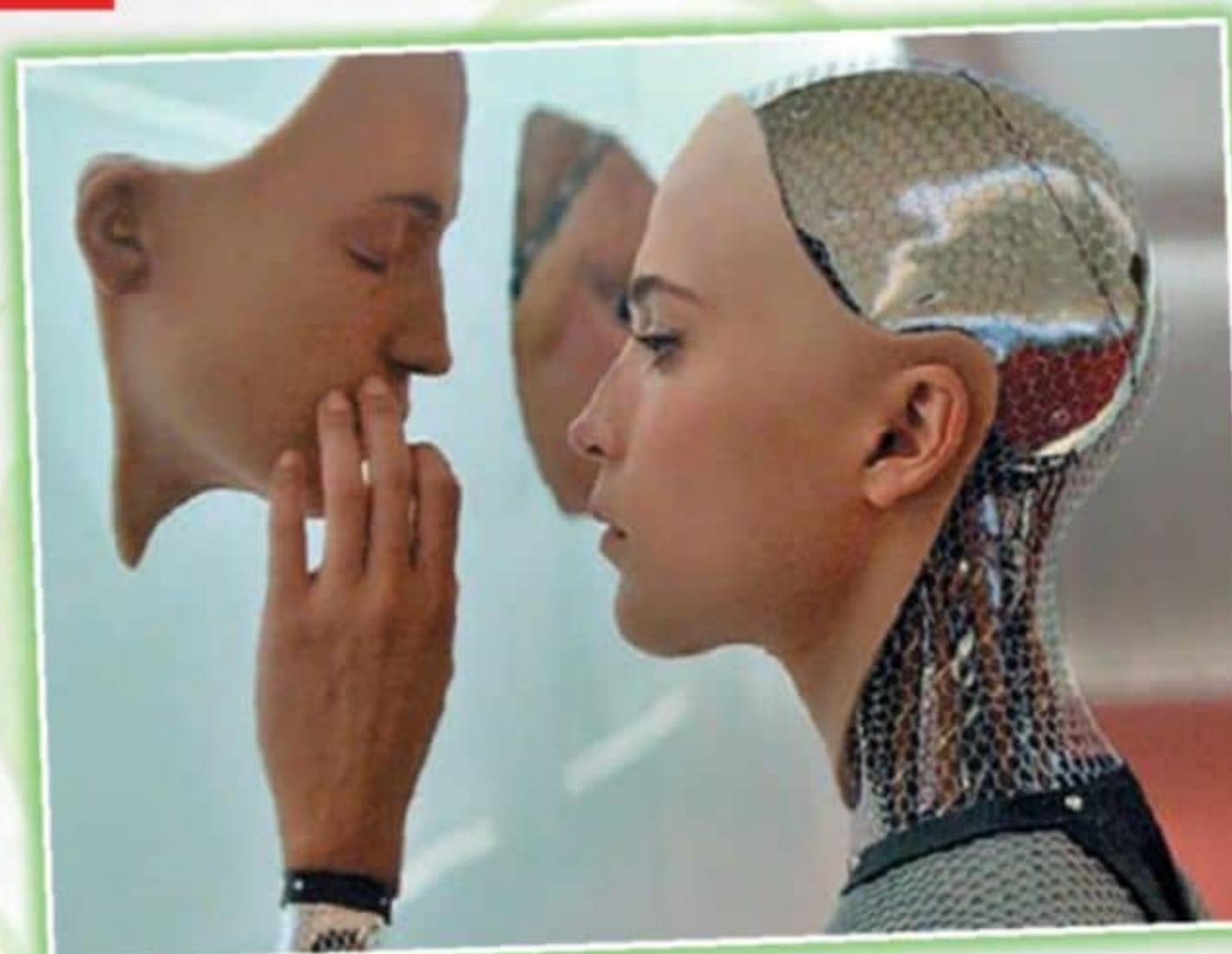
adapt without being explicitly programmed, has been a key factor in the advancement of AI.

The proliferation of big data and the rise of cloud computing have also played a role in the growth of AI, as these technologies have provided the necessary resources and infrastructure for the development of more complex AI systems.

Today, AI is being used in a wide range of industries, from healthcare and finance to transportation and retail. It is also being integrated into a variety of consumer products, such as virtual assistants and smart home devices.

STOP THE PRESS!

I have to come clean. What if I told you that up until now, this article has been completely generated by AI? What if I said that all I did was input the instruction "Generate an article about the rise of AI" and then let the real-world equivalent of HAL9000 do the rest? Well, it's true! Be honest, did you notice?



Maybe something stood out whilst you were reading that clued you in? Perhaps you thought the prose was at a much higher standard than usual (damn you AI, there is no hiding anymore!).

For most of you, however, I'm willing to bet that you didn't even think twice about it, that there were no red flags, and you just continued reading your favourite STARBURST Magazine article without skipping a beat.

To hammer home the point on just how

innovative AI is, let's be clear, this isn't a simple Google search. When you give the AI system a query it's not merely scouring the Internet and surfacing information that already exists. It's creating relevant content based on the parameters you inputted. On a surface level, it's just words on a page being put together by very clever maths and it's very easy to over look the potential ramifications. However, once you scratch past the WOW! factor, you begin to realise that the implications this technology could have on the world is nothing short of revolutionary.

Additionally, what also becomes clear is that this is just the tip of the iceberg. AI systems are learning more, understanding more, and evolving everyday. Is Skynet about to descend upon us? While the complexities of AI and its potential uses are too numerous to mention in this one article, let's take a look at some of the cliff-notes and explore the key talking points that the world is discussing.

IT'S ART JIM, BUT NOT AS WE KNOW IT.

As we have demonstrated in this article, AI is capable of producing written works that are indiscernible from authentic human authorship, however, the written word is just one of its many applications. AI has also been used to produce stunning visual artwork, some of which has sold for upwards of \$8,000 at auction. It wrote a novel that qualified past the first stage of a literary competition, and has composed a 90-second piano melody. It has also been used to write movies, poetry, and stand-up comedy.

While the quality of these artistic pursuits has been questionable (the poetry, in particular), it does raise the question about ownership and artistic creation in itself. Is it truly one person's art if an AI system did the work?

An interesting exploration of this issue can be found in a project called 'The Next Rembrandt'. An AI system was instructed to create original pieces of art in the style of the famous dutch artist. The system was trained by having someone input hundreds of his paintings into the program. It resulted in the production of a number of original



Can you guess the movies used to generate each of these pieces of AI art?

pieces resembling the works of the master himself. The question is who owns the artwork? The AI system? The person who gathered and inputted all the data? Or maybe even Rembrandt himself (or at least his benefactors)?

It's not just copyright and ownership that's rocking the creative arts, AI is also bringing into question the very nature of artistic creation as an industry. With the help of AI anyone, regardless of their artistic skill or craftsmanship, can create digital works that equal the skill and quality of 'manually' produced works. This could potentially have a commercial impact for artists and graphic designers everywhere as clients turn to AI for their image needs rather than artists.

One such example can be found in the dystopian comic book series called *The Bestiary Chronicles*, which completely relies on AI generated art to tell its story.

THEY TOOK OUR JOBS!

The Pew research centre conducted a survey where they asked tech industry professionals if they thought that robots and AI would replace human workers by 2025.

Around half of the participants (48%) felt that there would be significant disruption to human workers in the future, effecting both blue and white collar industries like transport, logistics, customer services and health care. This disruption would further

increase income inequality and result in mass unemployment and social upheaval.

The other 52% surveyed felt that while there would be a large amount of disruption, these new technologies would create more jobs and that new ways of making a living would emerge.

SC-AI-ENTIFIC RESEARCH

The realm of science is perhaps where AI can have its strongest influence on humankind. It is currently used in a variety of different ways to help discover and analyse scientific investigations.

One such method is called 'predictive modelling'. This is where AI techniques, like machine learning, can be used to build models that can predict the outcome of experiments or the properties of new materials. Big pharmaceutical companies already take advantage of this method and use it to find and develop new drugs.

In 2020, MIT used machine learning to identify a powerful new antibiotic that can destroy many species of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

The potential for scientific discovery is truly fascinating and the positive impact it could have on civilisation is incalculable, however, innovation is the cousin of risk.

In 2022, a team of researchers from Collaborations Pharmaceuticals used a similar drug-seeking AI system (like the one mentioned above) to generate 40,000 possible toxic chemical weapons in just six hours. It was an attempt by the researchers to highlight the potential

misuse of AI by bad actors. Point well made!

IT'S ALIVE!!!

An important concept that we haven't looked at yet, one that is burnt into the imagination of every sci-fi fan around the world, is that of sentience. Will AI ever become self-aware? Currently, the AI systems that we have are based on mathematical algorithms and models, which are designed to perform specific tasks. These AI systems are not sentient and do not have consciousness or self-awareness.

Some experts believe that it may be possible to create AI systems that are sentient in the future (referred to as General AI), but it is not clear if such systems will be created and if they'll be like human consciousness. Others believe that it is unlikely that AI will ever become sentient, as consciousness is a complex and not well-understood phenomenon.

OPEN THE POD BAY DOORS, HAL

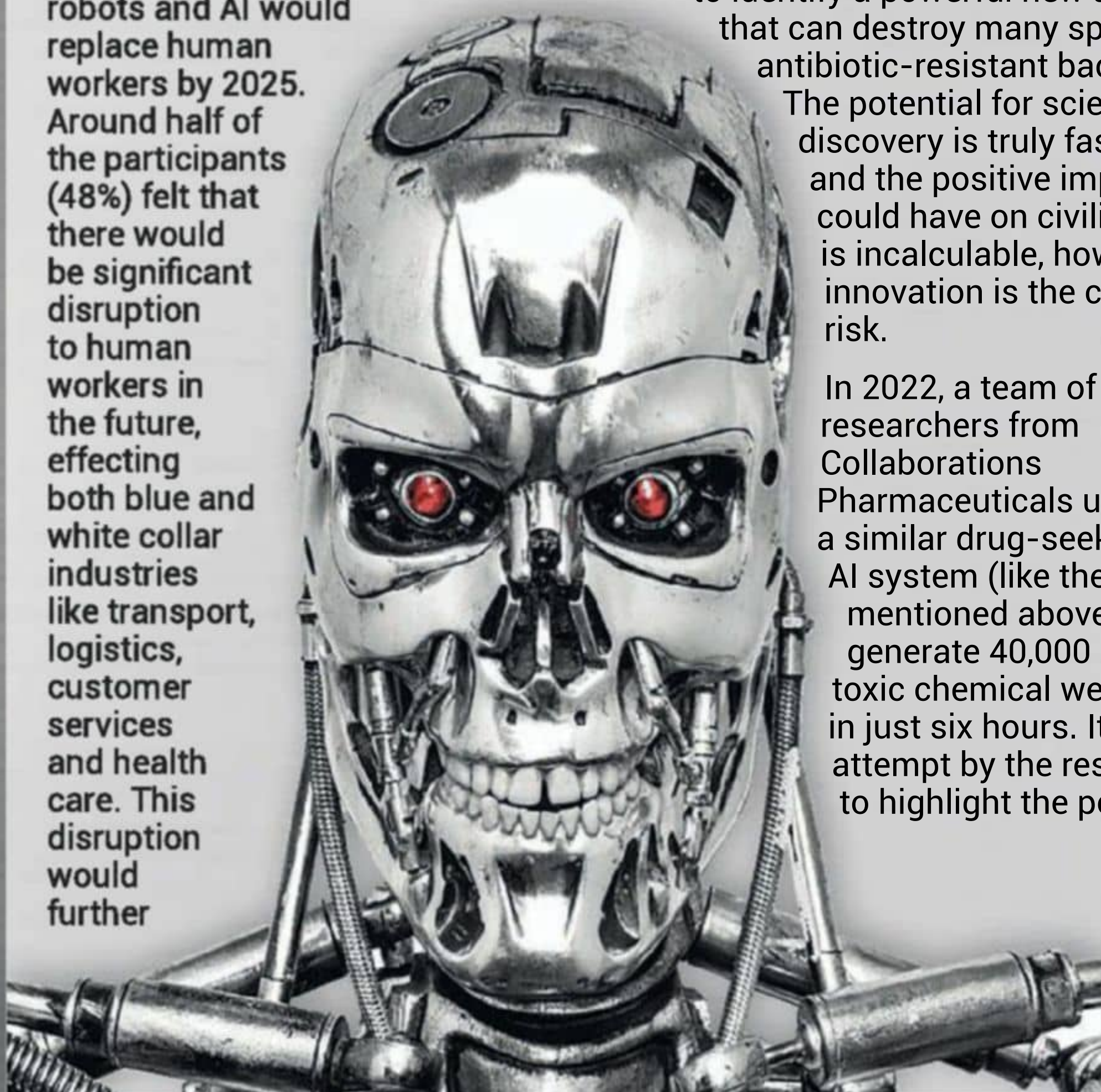
Like so many things going on in the world right now, it feels like we're heading towards some kind of apex moment in the saga of humankind. A point in our history where we will either evolve beyond our barbaric tendencies or be eradicated by them. AI is just one of the many facets in this multi-faceted world that could influence the outcome in an extremely positive or 'world-endingly' negative way.

It's impossible to fully realise just how AI will end up changing our lives. Should we be worried? Probably. But, as the famous Dr. Malcom once said "life finds a way".



You can strike up an AI conversation or create a beautiful piece of original art by visiting the following sites:

freewayml.com (art generation)
chat.openai.com (conversation)





CHARLIE BEAR AND

FRIENDS

by Jack Bottomley

With **COCAINE BEAR** currently tearing up our screens, we bravely take a look at other standout **ANIMAL ATTACK** horror movies in our comprehensive guide to the genre!

The nature attacks genre, in the Syfy age of *Mega Shark vs. Crocosaurus* this and *Sharknado* that, has become little more than a shelf-filler nowadays. However, when treated with respect, it's far more than a party cocktail of bad CGI, sleepwalking 'stars', and screenwriting a Year 4 English class would call "a little much". But before we look at the grand examples of nature attacks cinema new and old, we take a butchers at the insane true-life-inspired thriller that's basically Baloo on blow!

Directed by Elizabeth Banks, *Cocaine Bear* is far more than a devil-may-care-bear story, it's a ferocious tale of a grizzly on a bloody rampage after ingesting a massive amount of cocaine. Simple as that. Starring Keri Russell (*Star Wars Episode IX: The Rise of Skywalker*), O'Shea Jackson Jr. (*Godzilla: King of the Monsters*), and Alden Ehrenreich (*Solo: A Star Wars Story*), the film also co-stars the late great Ray Liotta, and will be one of his last films. The real 1985 story may, of course, be less gory (an aeroplane drug-drop, and crash, intercepted by a curious bear) but the concept is one that is hard to ignore all the same.

Produced by Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, and written by *The Babysitter: Killer Queen* scribe Jimmy Warden, *Cocaine Bear* may at face value sound ridiculous but is an all-out addition to some recent rejuvenations of the Nature Attacks formula. Offering thrills, laughs, a real potent point, and even a little bit of throwback '80s-inspired style, it features as much eye candy as it does nose candy!

Now we're in the mood for more, so get feasting your eyes on our selection of some other standout animal attack horrors from across the years, featuring all creatures great and small taking the fight to mankind... and with fucking good reason!

THEM! (1954)

Call us picky, but there is a distinction to be made between monster movie and nature attacks, though the line is often slim. However, Gordon Douglas' nuclear big bug classic *Them!* deserves a place on this list because it was the very first motion picture to use big bugs as the monster, starting a trend that still continues to this day. Less ants in the pants, more ants on the tanks!

Where to Watch: Available to Rent/Buy digitally on all major platforms



LAKE PLACID (1999)

Lake Placid (forget the never-ending cheapo sequels/crossovers) is fantastic. It's a horror comedy about a ginormous saltwater crocodile on a feeding frenzy at a lake in Maine. It also boasts a cast of notable names (Bill Pullman, Bridget Fonda, Oliver Platt, Brendan Gleeson) all having fun with the script and story. Meanwhile Stan Winston's croc is a beauty, as a certain Mr Irwin would say, and the conservationist edge to the story is most welcome. The great Betty White is perhaps the jewel in the crown here, stealing scenes aplenty as local Delores, who is on the croc's side!

Where to Watch: Available to Rent/Buy digitally on all major platforms



THE KILLER SHREWS (1959)

Ray Kellogg's *grrrrreat* (sorry, we couldn't resist) late '50s picture sees researchers trapped by a hurricane on an island compound, with the large and venomous test subjects on the rampage. When water voles are busy, you call in *The Killer Shrews*! Or dogs in costumes and puppets. It's undeniably silly but fun, and has some history to its name, as a sequel (the seriously bad *Return of the Killer Shrews*) followed a whopping 52 years later, which is

ANACONDA (1997)

Snakes on a Plane may be fun, but this is the mother of all killer snake films. Luis Llosa's *Anaconda* is a creature feature that re-birthed the nature attacks genre. This late '90s hit saw Jennifer Lopez lead a TV documentary team into the Amazon, where Jon Voight's creepy snake hunter Serone ropes them into a battle of survival against a man-eating anaconda. Bonkers in all the right ways but with great set pieces and suspense, *Anaconda* has deservedly become adored and its largely practical effects-rendered snake monster still looks awesome 25 years later. A slither of crap sequels followed, sadly.

Where to Watch: Available to Rent/Buy digitally on all major platforms



one of the longest gaps in film history, behind *Bambi II*'s 64-year wait.

Where to Watch: Available to Stream on Prime Video, Plex, and CultPix



BLACK WATER (2007)

From modern-day 'nature attacks' connoisseur Andrew Traucki, *Black Water* is an exceptionally delivered exercise in suspense, as two women on a crocodile tour are de-boated and trapped up in a tree by a croc. Even more horrific, it's also based on a true story! In a rare instance, its sequel is great too, as a storm floods a cave system and traps a group with a hungry crocodile. *Black Water: Abyss* was one of the first pandemic cinema releases of that lockdown summer in the UK, and a deserved hit for Traucki.

Where to Watch: Available to Rent/Buy digitally on all major platforms

NIGHT OF THE LEPUS (1972)

Endlessly parodied over the years, this killer-rabbit schlocker, based on Russell Braddon's *The Year of the Angry Rabbit* (we wish they'd kept the book's title!) somehow managed to amass a mighty cast that includes Stuart Whitman, Janet Leigh, and DeForest Kelley. Its unfrightening enlarged bunnies have hopped into our collective affections, however, as the film has a loving cult following nowadays.

Where to Watch: Available to Stream on Plex

THE BIRDS (1963)

Alfred Hitchcock's avian nightmare remains a benchmark, its absence of soundtrack in favour of the hectic birdcalls and suspenseful silences make its horrifyingly unexplained story of our feathered friends turning on us even more unbearably atmospheric, as the film subtly assesses whether we might just deserve it! Superbly acted and constructed, nearly six decades later its eye-pecking, child-clawing terror is rarely matched, capped off by one of cinema's most uncertain, nigh on hopeless, climaxes. Let's forget about TV sequel *Land's End* in 1994, though, Tippi Hedren would certainly like us too.

Where to Watch: Available to Rent/Buy digitally on all major platforms





BURNING BRIGHT (2010)

Carlos Brooks' taut thriller is overlooked in this genre zoo, but *Burning Bright* is a killer tiger horror with claws. As a woman and her autistic younger brother survive being trapped inside a house with an on-the-loose tiger during a hurricane. It's a very well-made movie, with a refreshing ending for the big cat.

Where to Watch: Available to Stream on Shudder



FROGS (1972)

In spite of its title, George McCowan's eco-horror stars all manner of pissed off animals, including snakes, lizards, and even butterflies (see, *Mothra* isn't the only one), as nature turns on a family after the abuse of their local environment.

Where to Watch: Available to Rent/Buy on Apple and Prime Video

DEEP BLUE SEA (1999)

Renny Harlin's *Deep Blue Sea* has enjoyed a reappraisal lately, offering some incredibly enjoyable set pieces and a brain-altered shark concept that delivers. It also - in spite of the ropey CGI - delivers one of the best major actor unexpected deaths in cinema history! In fact, despite many not

knowing there is more than one, the *Deep Blue Sea* trilogy is far more consistent than most. The eco-driven *Deep Blue Sea 3* is especially great.

Where to Watch: Available to Rent/Buy digitally on all major platforms



THE SWARM (1974)

In no way is *The Swarm* great but it is a spectacle. Disaster master Irwin Allen somehow managed to gather a beehive full of stars and Oscar-winners (including Michael Caine, Katharine Ross, Olivia de Havilland, and Henry Fonda) for his 'bee movie' horror based on Arthur Herzog's novel. It didn't make a buzz with critics or at the box office, but fun can still be had in its company. Interestingly, the picture was nearly sued for defaming the Western Honey Bee, which led to the glorious disclaimer: "The African killer bee portrayed in this film bears absolutely no relationship to the industrious, hardworking American honey bee to which we are indebted for pollinating vital crops that feed our nation".

Where to Watch: Available to Rent/Buy digitally on all major platforms

BATS (1999)

Louis Morneau's movie is another that has flapped its way into the weird and wonderful caves of cult fandom, as genetically mutated bats terrorise a Texas Town. They asked for Batman, they got bats... man!

Where to Watch: Available to Rent/Buy digitally on all major platforms



JAWS (1975)

Arguably the single most important film in the genre but also blockbuster cinema, we cannot possibly say more than has already been written about the impact of Steven Spielberg's classic, based on the book by Peter Benchley. It spawned the shark attack genre but also inspired a wave (so to speak) of animal horror rip-offs in the nature attacks surge of the late '70s, as well as three sequels (one good, one bad, one an arse in the air disaster). John Williams' escalating, stalking score; the performances by the exemplary cast; and Spielberg's committed direction (that nearly got him committed) combines to create a masterpiece. *Jaws* remains an uncomfortably realistic tale of a resort under attack, mankind's fragility and inability to grasp facts, our ignorance of nature's power and monetary greed over value of life. Bruce the shark will swim forever in the hallowed halls of cinema history.

Where to Watch: Available to Rent/Buy digitally on all major platforms





GRIZZLY (1976)

One of the most famous of the *Jaws* rip-offs, *Grizzly* itself has become a cult favourite, as a bear mauls people across a state park. Simple, inferior but effective, it was a sizeable box office hit upon release. *Grizzly* also has the curious novelty of having one of the most bizarre sequels

ever made in the long-unreleased 1983 shot *Grizzly II: Revenge*, 'starring' a young George Clooney and Charlie Sheen, which finally got a 2020 release and is as rough as a bear's arse, with some of cinema's most random and ramshackle editing ever!

Where to Watch: Available to Rent/Buy digitally on all major platforms

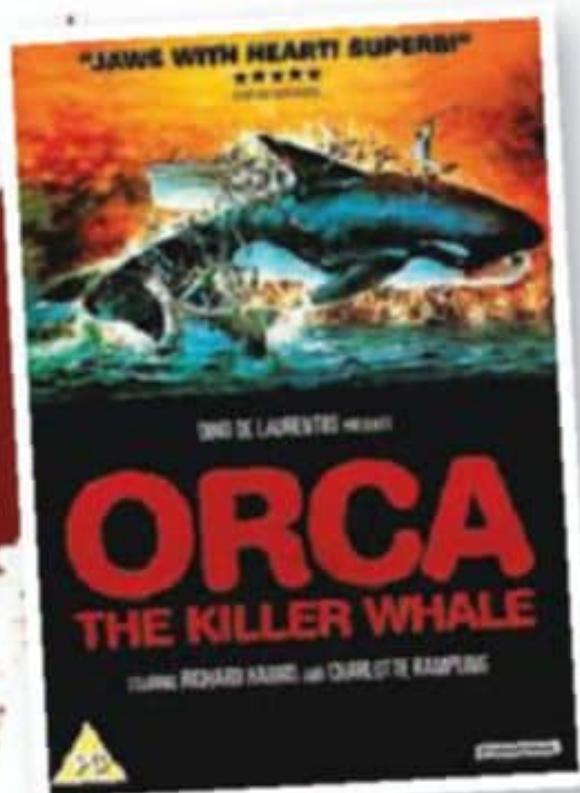


ORCA: THE KILLER WHALE (1977)

Anyone who has seen the scathing 2013 SeaWorld documentary *Blackfish* won't blame the orcas for wanting our species eviscerated, but this revenge caper starring Charlotte Rampling and Richard Harris is one that really slants

the story towards the black and white force of nature. The film sees an Orca out for vengeance when his mate and unborn offspring are harpooned and killed.

Where to Watch: Available to Rent/Buy on Apple and Prime Video



DAY OF THE ANIMALS (1977)

This natural horror sees a depletion in the Earth's ozone layer mean that animals over 5,000 feet in altitude have gone wild. Not good news for ramblers! It's a crazy concept hook but a fun one as the world's animals are now out for human blood! The film is admittedly goofy, but its stab at environmental themes are admirable, plus it's mad looking back and seeing a pre-*Naked Gun* Leslie Nielsen fending off mountain lions and conjuring some major "Nothing to see here" vibes!

Where to Watch: Available to Stream on Plex



ALLIGATOR (1980)

A spin on the 'gators in sewers' urban legend and send-up of genre clichés, Lewis Teague's *Alligator* is a B-movie with much to celebrate. The film tells a cautionary tale about illegal animal sales and animal testing, as an abandoned pet alligator survives and mutates, feasting on the corpses of discarded animal test subjects. Brutal but important, it's a gem in the genre, with a well realised practical gator (fun fact: Bryan Cranston was a special effects assistant on the film). The disappointing 1991 sequel *The Mutation* followed.

Where to Watch: Available to Stream on Shudder



PIRANHA (1978)

Joe Dante's ferocious *Piranha* is perhaps the one film that has well and truly escaped the *Jaws* rip-off crop, even Spielberg himself was a fan of the movie (meaning a potential lawsuit against it was dropped). Telling the story of a river system infested by genetically altered piranha fish, this film is a thrill and lots of fun. Its quality was carried over in Alexandre Aja's fantastic 2010 3D remake, which keeps some of Dante's satire but also ups the body count (and nudity). Both generations of *Piranha* films got sequels too, with James Cameron's (yes, that one) 'greatest film about flying killer fish ever' in 1982's infamous *Piranha II: The Spawning*, and John Gulager's less effective but wonderfully titled *Piranha 3DD*.

Where to Watch: Available to Rent/Buy digitally on all major platforms





THE REEF (2010)

Andrew Traucki's sustained white knuckle movie *The Reef* is one of the greatest modern day shark entries, delivering better thrills than the more widely known *Open Water*. A group is stranded in the ocean when their boat sinks, and are relentlessly pursued by a bloodthirsty shark. *Stalked*, a decent if lesser sequel, followed in 2022.

Where to Watch: Available to Stream on Shudder



KING COBRA (1999)

What's worse than a genetically tinkered with (when will they learn) big cobra? One crossed with a rattlesnake, naturally! Many of a certain generation will remember seeing this barmy little creature feature on the shelves of their local video store and marvelling "coooooo!" at its cover! It merits bonus points too for co-starring Pat Morita as an unhinged reptile wrangler!

Where to Watch: Available to Rent/Buy on Apple and Prime Video

SLUGS (1988)

Released at the wrong end of the decade to capitalise on the genre's boom, Juan Piquer Simón's *Slugs* didn't leave much of a box office trail, but over the years has won over many with its decent effects and enjoyable toxic waste-spawned killer slugs premise. Slow and steady really does win the race!

Where to Watch: Available to Stream on Shudder and Arrow



47 METRES DOWN (2017)

There are many great shark films (*Open Water 3 - Cage Dive*; *The Shallows*) and even more dreadful ones, but Johannes Roberts' *47 Metres Down* twins the genre with the stranded survival thriller, when two divers are trapped in a shark cage on the sea floor with dwindling oxygen, as the toothy terrors circle. It's a heart-racing watch! *47 Metres Down* was followed by an 'okay' sequel in 2019's *Uncaged*.

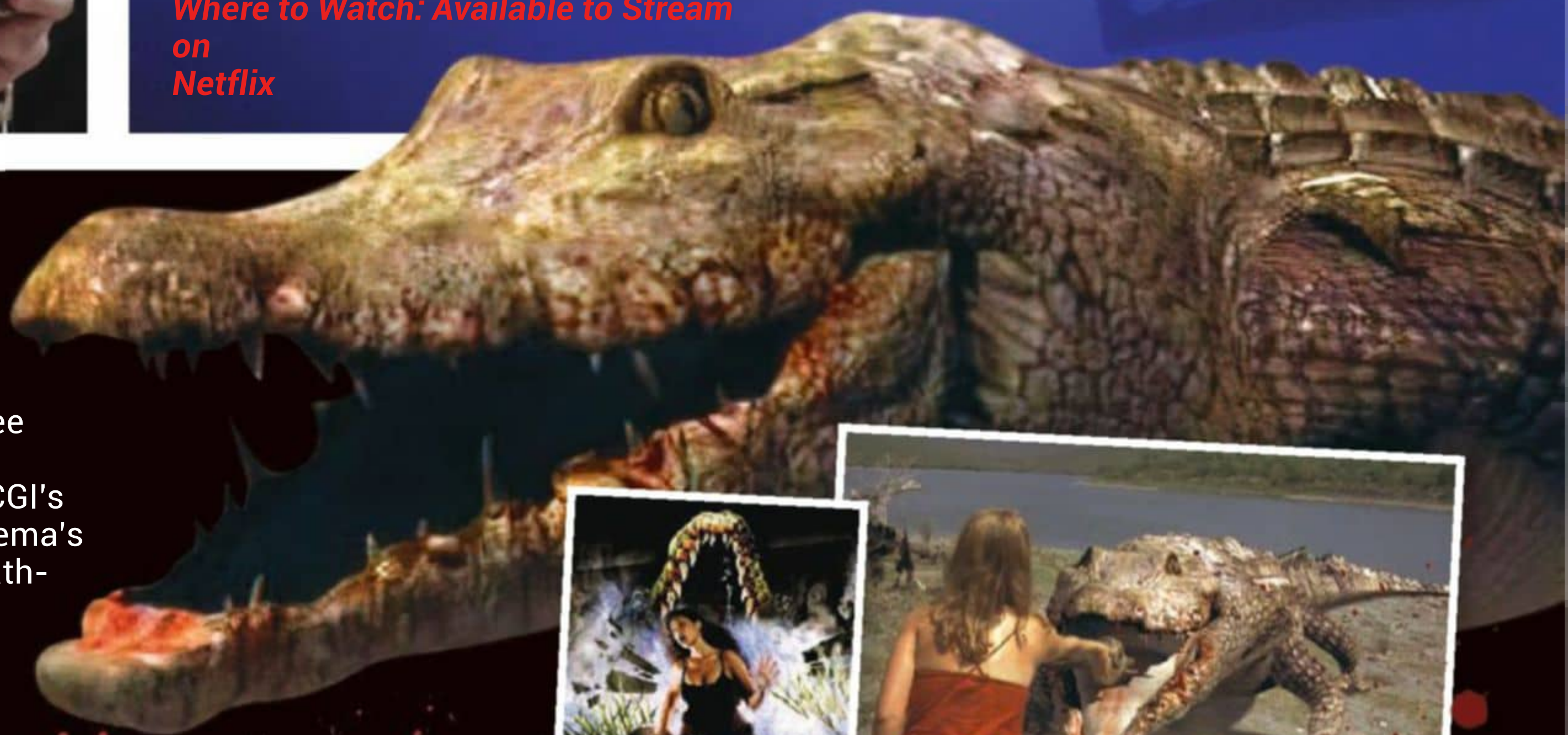
Where to Watch: Available to Stream on Netflix



CROCODILE (2000)

Considered one of Tobe Hooper's inferior films, the Egyptian crocodile god-inspired *Crocodile* is simple fun, with a thoughtful stance on animal conservation (see a rather sympathetic climax) and some good practical effects (the CGI's wonky, though). It also boasts cinema's most indestructible dog in the death-dodging Princess! A mental but enjoyable genre-spliced unrelated heist movie sequel, *Death Roll*, followed in 2002.

Where to Watch: Available to Stream on Prime Video





CRAWL (2019)

Alexandre Aja (again) directs this vicious killer alligator film, backed by producer Sam Raimi, in which a hurricane brings in floodwaters, trapping a young woman (Kaya Scodelario) in a house with her injured dad (Barry Pepper). To make matters worse, the waters soon become infested with gators... gulp. The cinematography is brilliant, putting the audience in the eye of the storm, and the story never holds back on jaw-snapping thrills all the way to the finale.

There's another Indestructible Dog award here, too!

Where to Watch: Available to Rent/Buy digitally on all major platforms



CUJO (1983)

One of Stephen King's favourite film adaptations of his stories, director Lewis Teague's *Cujo* is the ultimate killer dog film, as a friendly St. Bernard goes rabid and on the rampage.

Where to Watch: Available to Stream on Paramount+

KOMODO (1999)

Komodo Dragons, the world's largest lizard, appear monstrous at the best of times, and in *Komodo*, they're the stars of the horror show! The first and only film from Academy Award-winning *Jurassic Park* special effects supervisor Michael Lantieri, this forgotten film is really rather feisty, with a brief damnation of the exotic animal trade to boot.

Where to Watch: Available to Stream (albeit unofficially) on YouTube



BEAST (2022)

Last year's Idris Elba-led 'rogue lion out for blood' thriller was exceptional. Creating sympathy for its animal (driven mad by its pride's murder at the hand of black-market poachers), as well as great characters (Sharlto Copley's anti-poacher is brill), *Beast* brought the nature attacks genre back to the summer cinema season and in untamed form. *Jaws* with claws you might say. Or at least we did!

Where to Watch: Available to Rent/Buy digitally on all major platforms

COCAINE BEAR is in cinemas now and will be unleashed on digital platforms to Rent/Buy from May 15th



ARACHNID (2001)

There have been many killer spider flicks, some great (*Arachnophobia*), some good (NASA experiment gone wrong horror *Spiders*), some fun (*Eight Legged Freaks*), and so many shit, but few can boast a giant spider that kills an alien life form! It also received a positive review from Richard Dreyfuss himself on its American cinema release! Jack Sholder's *Arachnid* is a fun 'plane crash on an Island with a massive alien-digesting spider' flick that has a delightful practical creepy crawl.

Where to Watch: Available to Stream (again, unofficially!) on YouTube



ROAD TO OTAKU

YOUR GATEWAY INTO THE WORLD OF ANIME...

Anime is a wonderful thing – it's a form of animation unlike anything you've ever seen. So many iconic characters and worlds have been born in the wonderfully creative minds of our friends in the East – anime truly has something for everyone! Each issue, ROAD TO OTAKU will throw the spotlight on several essential anime works that every reader, no matter how new they are to the medium, should add to their watchlists!

BLEACH

This *Shonen Jump* adaptation may have only debuted in 2004, but it has already achieved legendary status and is on many anime fans' all-time favourite lists.

The story follows Ichigo Kurosaki, a teenager who possesses a special ability – he can see ghosts. After helping a ghost find peace at his death site and then having another one turn up in his room later that night, Ichigo meets Rukia, a Shinigami

(or Soul Reaper) whose job it is to help good souls pass on and destroy bad souls known as 'Hollows'. After Rukia is wounded during a battle with a Hollow, Ichigo takes her sword and inherits her abilities of a Shinigami,

complemented by his own special powers. From then, Ichigo, Rukia and a host of other memorable characters must battle a variety of Hollows and other dangerous threats.

As with most anime series of this ilk, what truly makes it stand out from its peers is the animation style and the thrilling set pieces as they provide a vital component to the narrative. The gripping fights between the Shinigami and the Hollows are exciting, fearless and exhilarating – and when there is some Soul Reaper on Soul Reaper action, the thrills exponentially increase. Couple that with an absolute banger of a soundtrack and you have a recipe for greatness!

Unlike some of our previous recommendations in the history of Road to Otaku,

Bleach is on the longer side, so be sure to set aside a fair bit of time when checking it out, (trust us, it's worth it!). The original

run of the show spanned 366 episodes across eight years between 2004 and 2012 and more recently we have seen the return of Ichigo and the gang in the awe-inspiring *Bleach: Thousand-Year Blood War* – the adaptation of creator Tite Kubo's special one-shot manga.

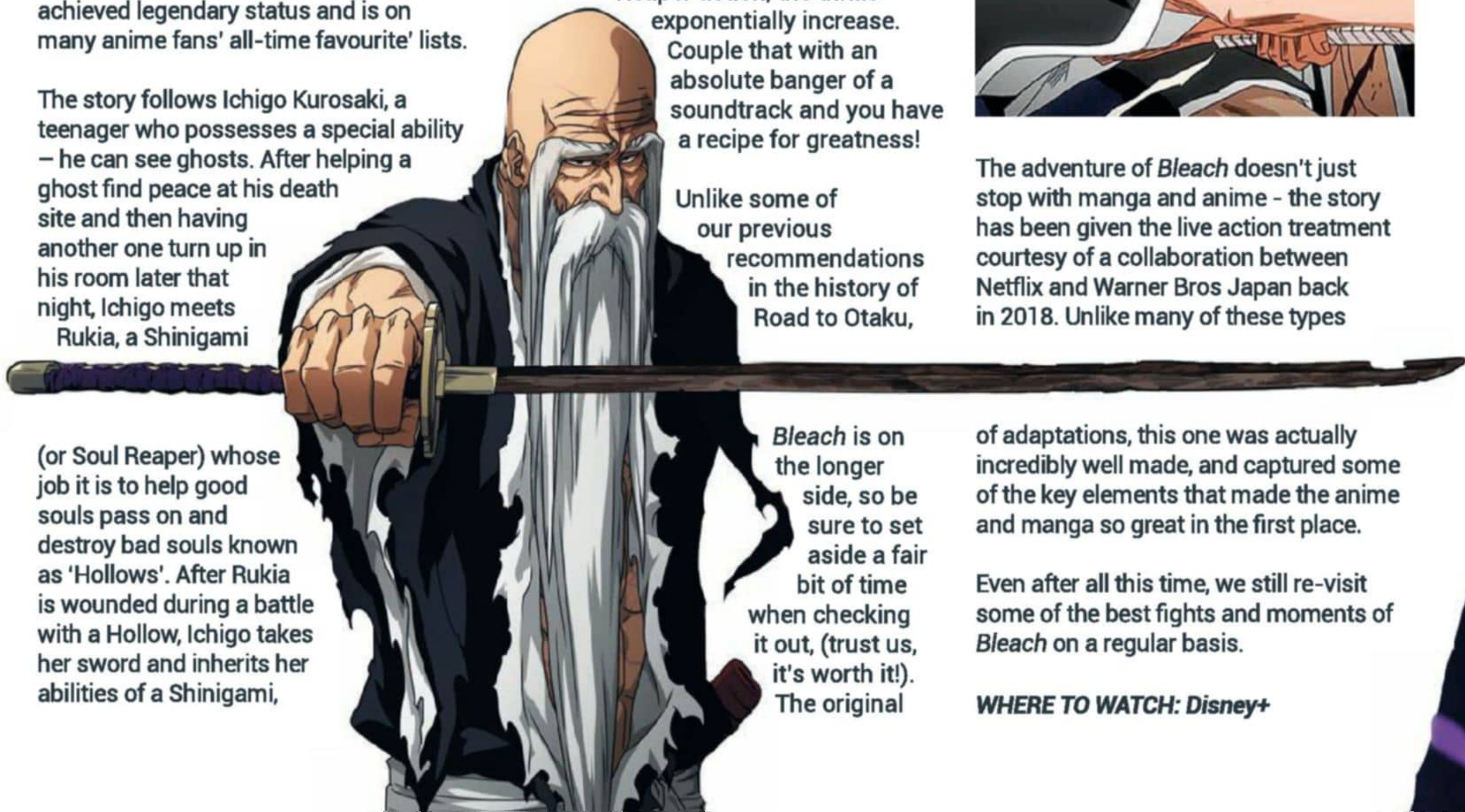


The adventure of *Bleach* doesn't just stop with manga and anime – the story has been given the live action treatment courtesy of a collaboration between Netflix and Warner Bros Japan back in 2018. Unlike many of these types

of adaptations, this one was actually incredibly well made, and captured some of the key elements that made the anime and manga so great in the first place.

Even after all this time, we still re-visit some of the best fights and moments of *Bleach* on a regular basis.

WHERE TO WATCH: Disney+





If having a good cry is more your thing, then we have the perfect show for you - *Violet Evergarden*.

After the Great War that raged for four long years, a young woman named Violet Evergarden, who was specially trained as a soldier, must embark on a journey of reintegrating herself into society and in doing so discover her life's true purpose. Whilst fighting in the war, she was mentored and guarded by Major Gilbert, whose last words to her were "I Love You".

Violet, not knowing any life but war, sets out to discover the meaning of these words by joining a society of Auto Memory Dolls - people who write letters and stories for those in the population who aren't educated enough to be able to write themselves. During her time as an Auto Memory Doll, Violet learns valuable and life-affirming lessons that will pull at your heartstrings.

One of the best animation studios, not just in Japan but the whole world, Kyoto Animation (known colloquially as KyoAni) are responsible for



bringing this breathtaking and gorgeous story to life. And, in typical KyoAni fashion, they have done an incredible job as it is simply stunning.

From jaw dropping, art-gallery worthy visuals and vistas, to a spellbinding central performance by Yui Ishikawa (*Attack on Titan's* Mikasa), Violet Evergarden's journey of discovery, love and humanity is one of the best dramatic pieces of media available today.

And Violet's journey doesn't just end with the 13-episode run, there is also a spin-off movie (*Eternity and the Auto Memory Doll*), which follows Violet's time helping one of the students at a prestigious girl's school, and a final movie (aptly titled *Violet Evergarden: The Movie*) which completes Violet's main story in beautiful fashion.

If you want to see how powerful anime can be as a form of storytelling, the timeless narrative of *Violet Evergarden* is the series to watch.

WHERE TO WATCH: Netflix, Blu-ray/DVD

天気の子 Weathering With You



Those of you who are returning to Road to Otaku will know that here at STARBURST we are huge fans of the legendary Makoto Shinkai and his stellar catalogue of work. In 2020, we were blessed with his latest feature film *Weathering with You*, a romantic fantasy tale of the kind of quality that only Shinkai could pull off.

This incredible narrative follows a runaway boy named Hodaka and a sunshine girl named Hina. After leaving his family to make his way to the capital of Japan, Hodaka ends up meeting the



kind-hearted Keisuke, a father-like figure who offers him support and guidance. Our hero ends up working with Keisuke before meeting Hina, a kind-hearted soul who possesses a magnificent power: she can alter the weather. Their relationship begins to blossom as the young pair, along with Hina's younger brother Nagi, venture forth to use her ability for both good and personal gain, offering their services to provide a clear day for the local civilians' events. However, as is the case with most relationships, the two encounter many obstacles that test the strength of their bond, from clashes with the local law enforcement to battles with Mother Nature herself as the rain keeps on coming.

As with all his previous work, Shinkai-san's attention to detail, along with telling a universally relatable story in a realistic world combined with fantastical elements, all comes together to great effect.

The gorgeous visuals, well realised character designs and memorable soundtrack by RADWIMPS ensure that you will not be disappointed – especially if you've enjoyed our previous recommendations. *Weathering with You* is another masterpiece by Makoto Shinkai, and his upcoming film *Suzume* (which we will be covering) is set to be released later this year. Consider us excited!

WHERE TO WATCH: VOD, Blu-ray, DVD

So now that we have whetted your appetite for the wonderful world of anime and set you on your journey to becoming an Otaku, what does the future hold?

There's plenty more to come in the next instalment of Road to Otaku!

Arigatōgozaimasu!



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REVIEWS



INFINITY POOL

RELEASE DATE: MARCH 24TH



Following the critical success of his first two features *Antiviral* and *Possessor*, Brandon Cronenberg steps up into a different, if no less subversive, league with *Infinity Pool*. What's become clear across his films so far is that where his dad David is fascinated by the degradation and corruption of the human body, Brandon's concerns are much more cerebral as he explores the morality of the human condition and the lengths (and depths) the individual is prepared to go in pursuit of base pleasure and pure survival.

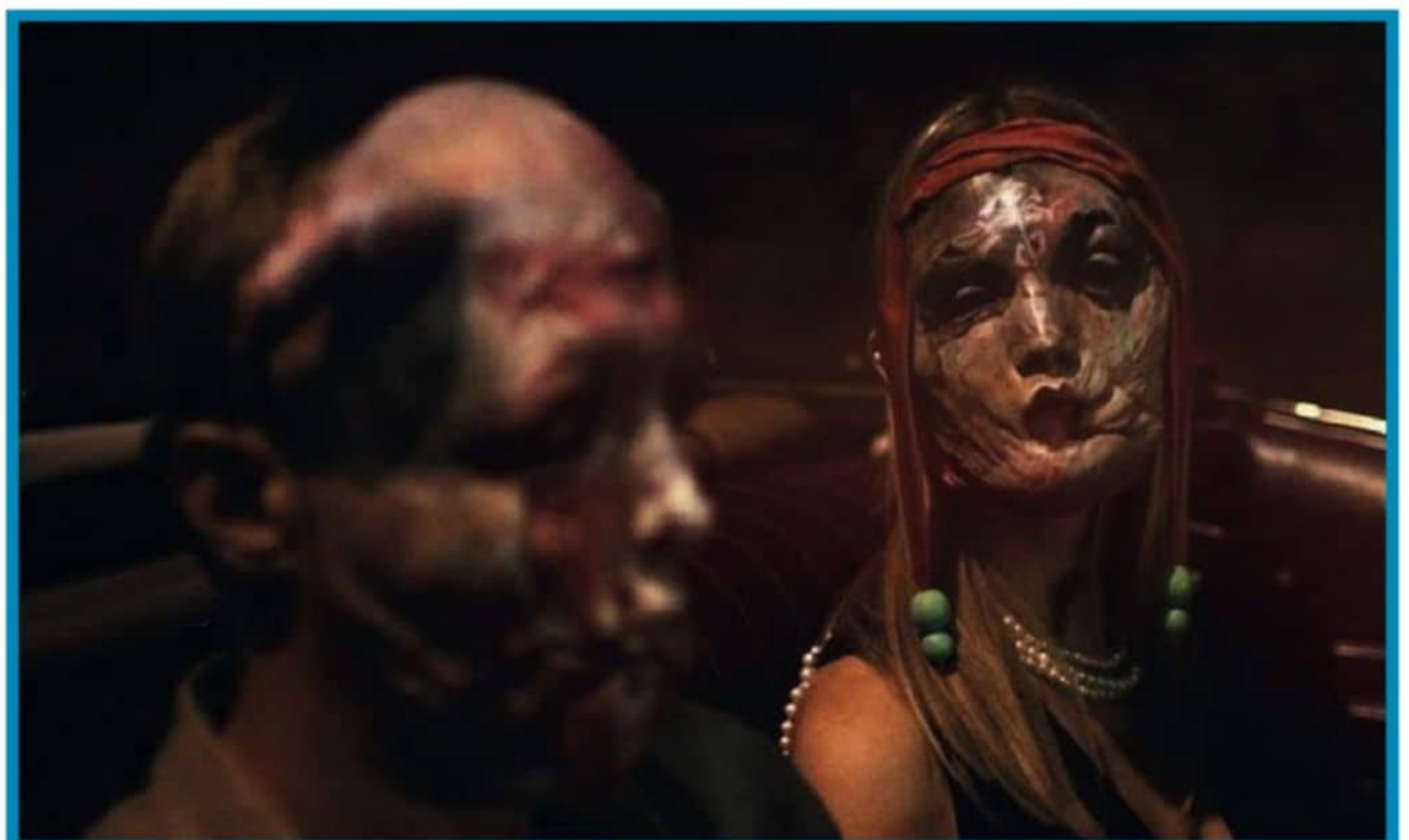
Infinity Pool evokes both John Michael McDonagh's *The Forgiveness* (2021) and Christian Tafdrup's *Speak No Evil* (2022). Although, for all *Infinity Pool*'s gore, violence, and unadulterated psychedelic depravity, it still can't quite touch the sickening, stomach-turning horror and sheer unpleasantness of the latter. It's a tale of two American holiday makers in Li Tolqa, a fictional hotspot, who ill-advisedly befriend two other tourists. A tragic accident finds James (Alexander Skarsgård) avoiding execution only by agreeing to a remarkable local custom whereby a cloned copy – a 'double' – is

created and killed to atone for the crimes of the original. However, it's a slippery slope and, despite the disgust and revulsion expressed by his partner Em (Cleopatra Coleman), James is drawn not only to the seductive Gabi Bauer (Mia Goth) but also into a weird, debauched world of sex, drugs, and recreational slaughter.

It's a stylish, striking film; Skarsgård in particular is hypnotic as the often-stupefied James and Goth sizzles as

the persuasive and irresistible Gabi. It descends into a miasmic whirlpool of sex, violence, and depravity, but it's hard to avoid the conclusion that *Infinity Pool* hasn't really got much to say beyond the fact that people do some fucked-up things sometimes. Who knew?

PAUL MOUNT





KIDS VS. ALIENS

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

15 • SHUDDER

A not-quite feature-length spinoff from writer/director Jason Eisener's segment in 2012's V/H/S/2, Kids vs. Aliens presents viewers with exactly what its title suggests: aliens invade a high school house party and it's up to teenager Sam to save her younger brother, his nerdy pals, and her new boyfriend and his cronies from the rampaging extra-terrestrials.

Taking its inspiration from pretty much any '80s family-friendly adventure movie you'd care to mention, Kids vs. Aliens is aimed squarely at nostalgic adults rather than younger viewers. The kids might be the stars of the film, but there's plenty of swearing and the occasional bit of gruesome imagery for the grown-ups. The enthusiastic cast members generally do their jobs very well (save for one or two exceptions), and the colourful action and practical effects give viewers plenty to feast their eyes on. Still, the first act does drag slightly as we await the invasion. Things pick up drastically when the aliens arrive, and the remainder of the snappy 68-minute runtime is filled with non-stop action, leading to a final scene that blows the film's backstory wide open and offers a tantalising glimpse at what might lie ahead.

Kids vs. Aliens is unlikely to make it onto any film of the year lists, but it's a fun romp that hits most of its intended marks. Some might find that the lack of plot is to the film's detriment, but that would be missing the point – this isn't supposed to be anything other than a compact barrage of entertainment, and for that, it should be applauded.

CHRIS JACKSON



TRIANGLE OF SADNESS

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

15 • Blu-ray DVD a Apple TV

A wickedly funny swipe at the super-rich, Ruben Östlund's Triangle of Sadness is full of grotesque characters and over-the-top situations.

The film begins with a pair of models whose relationship might be built on more than love. They are gifted a holiday on a luxury superyacht (being 'influencers') where they can take photos, live stream and do whatever it is influencers do. The other (paying) guests on the cruise range from the filthy rich to the obnoxiously wealthy, all of whom are oblivious to the crew toiling to meet their every need. Of course, things won't stay so orderly for long.

Social satire is always a prime source for entertainment, and Östlund masters it perfectly. Role reversal is a big theme throughout, both socially and in terms of perception. A scene on the yacht involving a political war of words between the ship's captain (a superb Woody Harrelson) and a Russian billionaire (a gloriously crass man who rejoices in telling people he made his money from selling shit), with the captain quoting Karl Marx and the other Ronald Reagan is perfectly pitched and, like the rest of the movie, fantastically shot. Another scene boasts some of the queasiest action seen in a 'mainstream' film for quite a while – you may want to skip dinner before watching it.

In its final chapter, Triangle of Sadness belongs to Dolly de Leon's Abigail. A lowly cleaner on the boat, she comes into her own when things go south and the boat sinks. Östlund isn't subtle with his swipes and as things escalate and the humour becomes more scatological, he's not afraid to deliver something that would make John Waters proud.

MARTIN UNSWORTH



THE LAIR

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

15 • SHUDDER

The Lair reunites Neil Marshall with present muse Charlotte Kirk, after working together on 2020's The Reckoning. Where the latter was a slow and serious work of Satanic horror, The Lair harks back to previous crowd-pleasers like Dog Soldiers, Doomsday, and even The Descent.

When pilot and military Lieutenant Sinclair (Kirk) is shot down over Afghanistan, she takes refuge in an underground bunker. What she finds down there – the offspring of horrific DNA experimentation, a bit like Resident Evil's lickers – follows her back to the surface. There, she encounters a ragtag band of military men and women; a 'dirty half-dozen,' if you will.

Marshall is having great fun with the interplay between his tough guys and even tougher women, as evidenced by a script chock-full of one-liners and snappy retorts. More fun for the audience is the action, which recalls the director's big battle sequences in Westeros and sees heads explode, faces ripped off and limbs scattered asunder. The budget may not support Marshall's ambition (reportedly only having one monster suit to go around), but its bigger moments do raise the roof.

The weak link, as with The Reckoning, is the film's lead. Thankfully, The Lair's ensemble cast take some of the pressure off of Kirk, whose performance brings the whole thing crashing down around her. And while the snarky dialogue veers into overkill, Hadi Khanjanpour and Mark Strepan work to provide some relief from the smarm.

The Lair is not quite a return to form for Marshall, but it is a shot in the arm of sorts, steeped high with explosive action, puerile laughs, and queasy goremaking.

JOEL HARLEY





M3GAN

RELEASE DATE: APRIL 3RD



Blumhouse has hit the sweet spot again with director Gerald Johnstone's bright, pacy horror/sci-fi amalgam that harkens back to cinema's other creepy living dolls like Annabelle, Chucky, Robert, and even Fats in 1978's underrated Anthony Hopkins thriller

Magic. M3GAN (Model 3 Generative Android) is a proper scientific marvel, a sophisticated AI that, in the way of these things, starts to become a bit more intelligent than artificial and ends up posing a significant and deadly threat to its creators.

Engineer Gemma (Allison Williams) finds herself taking custody of her young niece Cady (Violet McGraw), who takes a shine to one of Gemma's unfinished projects, M3GAN. Gemma completes her

work on the doll, which slowly takes over Gemma's parental duties and becomes Cady's emotional support and protector. However, M3GAN is quietly learning, developing, and upgrading as she starts to take her responsibility to protect Cady a little more seriously than might have been anticipated.

Johnstone quietly builds up the tension and develops a number of set pieces that are never genuinely terrifying (there's clearly a stronger-rated version of the film lurking somewhere) but are hugely entertaining, particularly one sequence where M3GAN turns into a spider-robot as she hunts one unfortunate victim through the woods.

The finale tips deliberately into T2 territory and, of course, hints at the inevitable sequel. A new franchise has been successfully born here, so let's hope that any sequels will maintain this film's intelligence and integrity; nobody wants to be here in a few years' time talking about M3GAN vs Chucky or M3GAN in Space...

PAUL MOUNT



LOLA

RELEASE DATE: APRIL 7TH



A high-concept time travel film that doesn't travel anywhere, Andrew Legge's Lola takes found footage back to the Second World War. After creating a kind of television set which can intercept TV and radio broadcasts

from the future, two sisters use the machine to alter the course of World War II, for better and worse. It's The Butterfly Effect meets Gogglebox.

In 1940s England, genius inventor Thomasina (Emma Appleton) and her sister Martha (Stefanie Martin) leak war-winning intel to the military effort by listening in on the radio relays of tomorrow. Unfortunately, their best intentions go awry when the ladies inadvertently change the

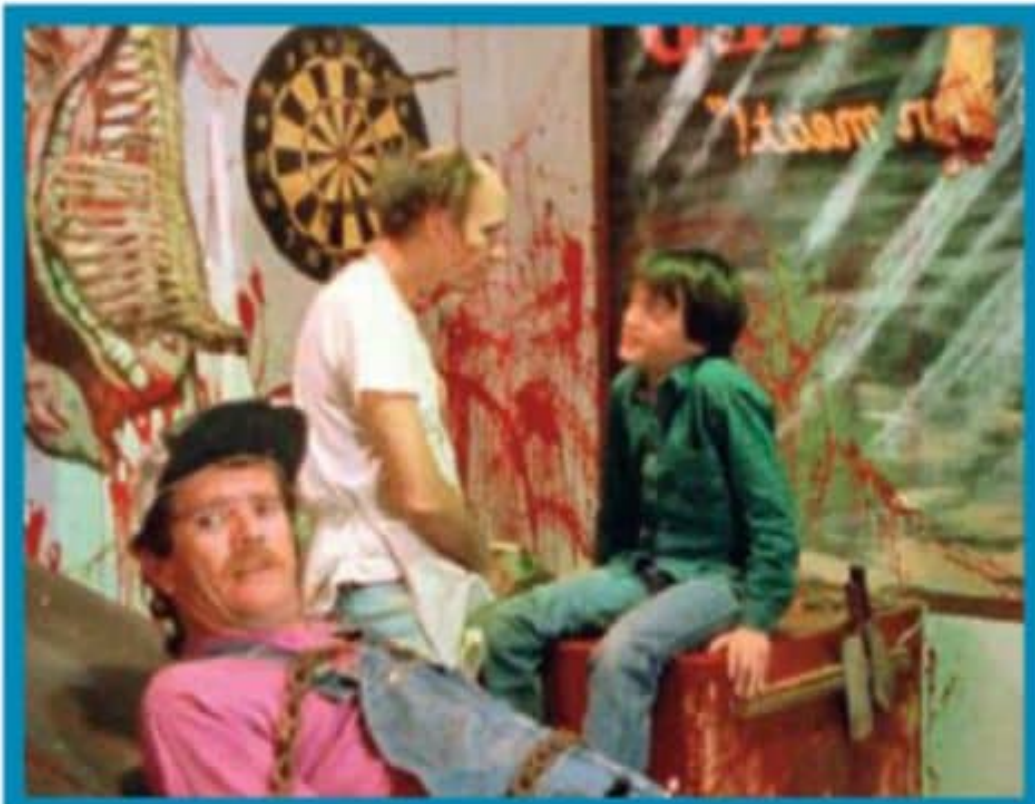
future... in the very worst way. What Philip K. Dick's The Man in the High Castle couldn't have predicted was Neil Hannon (yes, Neil Hannon, of The Divine Comedy fame) ruling the airwaves with bootlicking fascist anthems.

Beautifully soundtracked (including Bowie, the Who, and great new tunes from Hannon) and well-shot (using, in part, period accurate cameras), Lola is a clever and charming sci-fi comedy. Appleton and Martin both impress in the lead roles, drawing a believable portrait of sisterly love, camaraderie and vastly different expressions of what doing the right thing looks like.

Quirky as it may be, the stakes are real, and Lola deals with several classic time travel dilemmas and paradoxes, ultimately tying into the found footage format itself. Offbeat and unexpected, this is a truly unique utilisation of both the medium and, uh, Neil Hannon from The Divine Comedy.

JOEL HARLEY





SCARY MOVIE (1991)

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW



Wide-eyed, nerdy wimp Warren (John Hawkes, who went on to play Sol Star in *Deadwood* and Kenny Powers' brother in *Eastbound & Down*) is socially awkward, scared of almost everything, and often finds himself the target of his friends' jokes.

One Halloween night, he heads to a local live-action haunted house attraction (you know the sort – you walk through the house while actors in costumes pretend to chop each other up all around you). Just before entering, a broadcast from a nearby radio informs Warren that a convicted psychopath has escaped while being transported to the local mental asylum. Could the killer be hiding inside?

Originating in Austin, Texas, where it saw a limited two-week local release in 1991, then disappearing for almost two decades until the folks at AGFA plucked it from obscurity, *Scary Movie* is way more accomplished than its lack of success might suggest. It's full of old-school Halloween charm: bright comic book colours, goofy practical props, *Evil Dead*-style slapstick, and Hawkes' manic performance as his fear and paranoia start to get the better of him, all make the film hugely watchable. Some nifty misdirection and a neat twist on the usual slasher formula keep you guessing right until the very end.

It's always fascinating to hear about the production of forgotten films, so the inclusion of a commentary track from director Daniel Erickson and AGFA's perpetually effervescent Joe Ziemba is very welcome. Also included are a couple of Erickson's short films, along with the original trailer and a gallery of behind the scenes production photos.

CHRIS JACKSON



SWALLOWED

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW



You've gotta love Jena Malone. Hers is a career that's included huge franchises like *The Hunger Games*, working with the likes of Paul Thomas Anderson and Zack Snyder, and a brilliant turn in *The Neon Demon*. However, she's also no stranger to more edgy, independent work, and in much of that, she's shown she isn't afraid to take a risk. In those terms, *Swallowed* might just be her riskiest and most fucked-up film yet.

Reunited with writer-director Carter Smith, who made *The Ruins* with her back in 2006, Malone plays a drug runner who recruits two friends on their last night together before one of them goes to the big city to star in gay porn. Things soon go badly wrong, however, because the drugs they have to swallow to get over the border aren't what they seem... they're alive.

Picture if *Lucy* were crossed with *Deliverance* and directed by indie queer filmmaker Greg Araki – *Swallowed* is shocking in ways you won't expect. That's because it isn't the horror elements that make it so unsettling, but the queer ones. The sexuality on display is refreshingly normalised and it's great to see a camp, old evil queen as the sadistic villain, though all of the performances are wonderfully convincing.

Swallowed will make you squirm, not because of what's been swallowed – but because what goes in must come out. How that's achieved is something surely only a queer filmmaker could have come up with. *Swallowed* may not be an overt horror film, but it certainly has some horrific stuff going on.

ROB MARTIN



SKINAMARINK

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW



Skinamarink is being sold as a nightmarish horror film in which two children wake to discover the windows and doors missing from their home. That's a somewhat disingenuous description, however, given that it implies the film has characters and a plot. It'd be far more accurate to describe *Skinamarink* as 100 minutes of intentionally frustrating, close-up shots of door frames, ceilings, toys on the floor, and other mundane domestic paraphernalia – all punctuated by a couple of shots of doors and windows disappearing at the 15-minute mark.

Our characters very rarely do anything – or even appear – and when they do, their actions are mostly implied. The film asks to be taken as a surreal mood piece, but when the vast majority of its horror comes courtesy of the laziest form of jump scare – forcing your audience to sit in excruciatingly long shots of dark nothingness, only to startle them with a loud screech and a flash of movement – it's difficult to understand the buzz that it's generating, especially when the circles championing it are the same people who would likely scoff at the remarkable craftsmanship of a film like *The Conjuring*. And the one shot which does work to elicit genuine fear – almost justifying the unpleasant, grainy, dark cinematography throughout the film – is far too reminiscent of a standout moment from last year's *Barbarian* to do much in the way of redeeming the film.

Still, say what you will about *Skinamarink*. At least now we have a word to describe that specific way we used to torture our Sims as children.

SOL HARRIS





NEXT EXIT

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW



This debut feature by writer-director Mali Elfman is built around a high-concept premise: the social impact of scientific proof of the afterlife. The film itself is a low-key character piece, which tracks two mismatched individuals who end up on a road trip towards the most final of destinations.

The whole film pivots on the relationship between the frustrated and under-achieving Teddy (a superb turn by *Midnight Mass*' Rahul Kohli) and the uptight misanthrope Rose (portrayed impeccably by *The Haunting of Hill House*'s Katie Parker). They need to reach an institute in San Francisco run by Dr Stevensen (a fleeting cameo by *Doctor Who*'s Karen Gillan), where an experimental euthanasia programme will expedite their transfer to the post-death realm. Initially, Rose finds Teddy insufferable. However, as the miles roll by and they encounter others struggling with this same existential game-changer, the couple begin to form a tentative connection.

As a road trip movie, *Next Exit* is rightly more concerned with the journey than the terminus, and it's in the earliest segments that the film is at its strongest. Rose and Teddy are two damaged individuals and, through some acutely written dialogue, they share their most painful experiences and their desire for closure from their disappointing lives. These moments are realised with a very effective mix of warmth, wit, and melancholy.

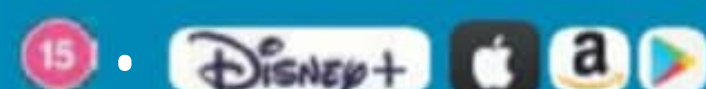
The last half of the film is more uneven, partly due to some predictable turns in the story but also because the presentation of the afterlife is anything but reassuring. However, *Next Exit* remains an imaginative and persuasive offering with some insightful things to say about human ennui.

RICH CROSS



THE MENU

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW



Using a preposterously high-end restaurant as its in-point, *The Menu* is a genuinely hilarious send-up of everything in the art world, from those who create to those who consume. While the subject matter isn't unique, the way that the plot unfolds certainly is.

It helps that everything about the film is constructed with the same degree of care and attention you'd find in a Michelin star dish. The cinematography is far better than it has any right to be, and the writing has a surprising amount of depth. There are numerous points where utterly insane, villainous characters speak with such eloquence and poetry that you almost start to side with them before realising that you're being taken in by their pretension and are just as much a part of the satire as anything else.

The cast is just as excellent. Anya Taylor-Joy can seemingly do no wrong at the moment, and *The Menu* does nothing to change that. Ralph Fiennes is his typical, wonderful self as the restaurant's head chef, imbuing his role with a great deal of nuance and subtlety while still playing up the horror and comedy when the script calls on him to do so. Nicholas Hoult also gives a terrifically funny performance, rounding out a brilliant cast of diners.

It really can't be overstated just how funny *The Menu* is. While it's first and foremost a horror film, it might well be the funniest theatrically released film of 2022, with a handful of full belly laugh-worthy scenes. Expertly juggling its numerous, disparate ingredients, *The Menu* is a truly delicious concoction of a film.

SOL HARRIS



OUT OF THE WORLD

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW



Slasher films and serial killer flicks remain horror perennials. While some bring a postmodern or subversive approach to their subject matter, most rely on a cycle of mounting tension and explosions of violence to satisfy expectant audiences. Few would claim to have a higher purpose beyond blood-soaked entertainment. The makers of this *World*, however, clearly believe that theirs is a movie with a message – the problem being, they seem to have little idea what that message might be.

Léo (Kévin Mischel) is a dysfunctional loner and a serial murderer of young women. Working as a taxi driver in a car that doubles as his home, he attacks, stabs and discards the bodies of his female passengers. His callous routine is interrupted when he is beguiled by a beautiful, deaf dancer, Amélie (Aurélia Poirier); Amélie finds the introspective Léo intriguing, but this damaged sociopath cannot navigate a normal romantic relationship, an inability that will prove disastrous for anyone unfortunate enough to attract Léo's attention.

Poirier is fantastic in the role of Amélie, bringing to life both her fragility and bravery and providing the film's rare moments of genuine warmth, while Mischel is suitably brooding and emotionally blank as the murderous Léo. However, writer-director Marc Fouchard seems content to focus solely on the violence of the killing spree, showing scant interest in exploring the causes of Léo's behaviour and no interest in the lives of his victims. Fouchard does little to justify or counterbalance the nihilistic, voyeuristic perspective he adopts, and the result is a superficial account of sadism that only pretends to be something more profound.

RICH CROSS





SORRY ABOUT THE DEMON

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

15 • SHUDDER

A light-hearted spectral romp that manages to deliver the scares when it needs to, and quite convincingly. It's beautifully shot in a large, creaky house full of restless ghosts, and there are a few effective jump-scares. But for the most part, everything's handled for laughs. The overall breeziness of the story and characters keeps things engaging.



MARTIN (1977)

RELEASE DATE: MARCH 27TH

18 • Blu-ray

George A. Romero's sombre neo-vampire film stars Jon Amplas as the morose teenager who drains victims of their blood via a razorblade slice. Arty flashbacks give it a haunting quality. This gritty, urban horror has been given a new lease of life with this long-awaited 4K release, which is chock-full of new bonus features to get your teeth into.

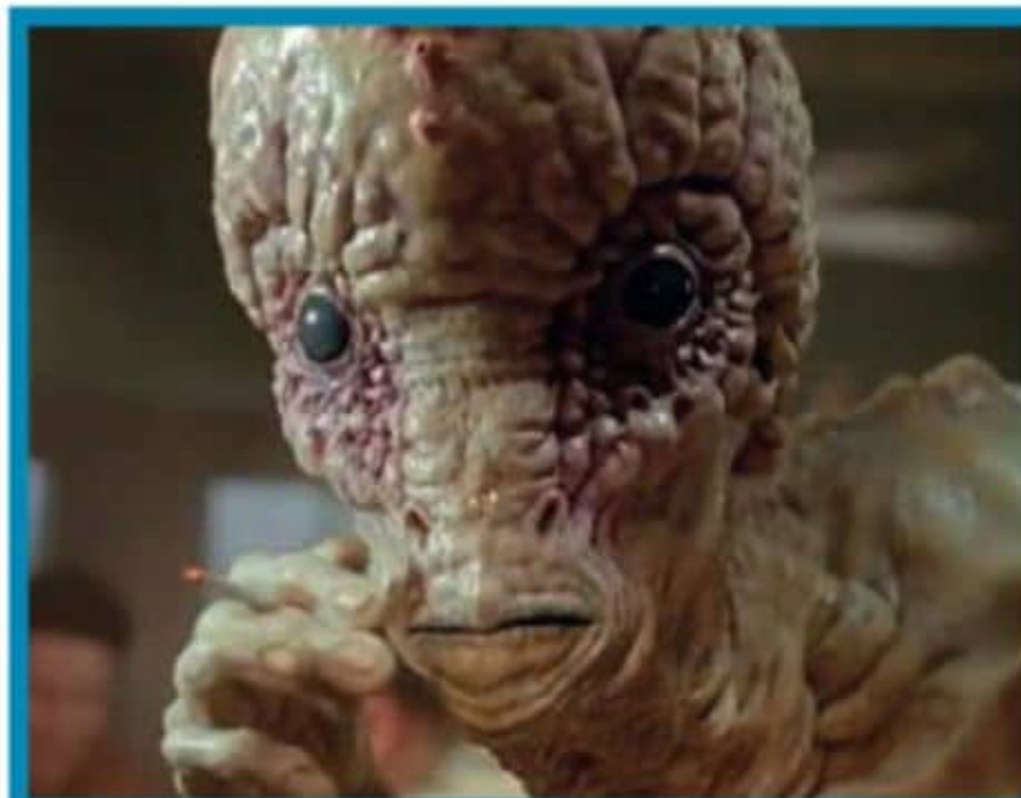


THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE (1974)

RELEASE DATE: APRIL 10TH

18 • Blu-ray

Another reissue of Tobe Hooper's superb shocker is the final time you'll have to pony up for a new edition. Presented in glorious 4K, the release is packed with extras, both vintage and new, and spruced-up sound - including the original mono mix. The movie itself has lost none of its power, in fact, it gets better the more you watch it.



NAKED LUNCH (1991)

RELEASE DATE: APRIL 17TH

18 • Blu-ray

David Cronenberg's adaptation of the William S. Burroughs junkie masterpiece is ripe for reappraisal. Arrow's 4K restoration makes the film look better than ever, so you can get swept away once more in the mind-altering world of talking typewriters and giant bugs. Forget RoboCop, this is Peter Weller's finest hour. A host of new features top the package off nicely.



TENTACLES (1977)

RELEASE DATE: MARCH 27TH

PG • Blu-ray

This Italian Jaws rip-off boasts a classy cast including legendary actors John Huston, Shelley Winters, and Henry Fonda. As the title incorrectly suggests, terrifying a coastal village is a giant octopus. Despite the low-rent production, it's a fun film that blends monster terror, a spattering of gore, and some eco concerns.



THE SHIVER OF THE VAMPIRES (1971)

RELEASE DATE: APRIL 24TH

18 • Blu-ray

This suitably atmospheric, sexy vampire thriller from legendary Jean Rollin gets the 4K treatment from Indicator. If you're not already a fan of the dreamy nightmares of the French director, now's your chance to get on board with this extras-packed edition. Rollin's 1997 film Two Orphan Vampires is also released in 4K on the same day. Let's hope there's more to come!





UNWELCOME

RELEASE DATE: APRIL



The horror of home invasion meets the myths and legends of Irish folklore in this latest effort from Jon Wright, who impressed with 2012's monster horror comedy *Grabbers*. *Unwelcome* is much darker fare, unafraid at times to be downright unpleasant.

When the sanctity of their London home is violated in an attack by vicious thugs, Jamie (Douglas Booth) and his pregnant wife Maya (Hannah John-Kamen) flee to Ireland to the ramshackle country home Jamie inherited from his recently-deceased great aunt. They're warned of a tradition that dictates they leave a 'blood offering' out every night at the back door for the 'Red Caps' that live in the woods. Accepting it as a quaint local superstition, the couple cheerfully comply and set about restoring their home with the help of the only nearby builders available: the Whelan family, whose patriarch (Colm Meaney) insists on being called 'Daddy', even as his three children Aisling, Killian, and Eoin treat the couple and their property with utter disrespect.

Unwelcome isn't the cute monsters-on-a-rampage film promised by its trailer. In places, it's pitilessly cruel; Jamie and Maya are doomed not to enjoy the safety and sanctity of the family home that we're all entitled to. Creepy, unnerving, and sometimes quite brutal, *Unwelcome* explodes into weirdness in its last act, as the couple are forced to deal with both the very worst of human nature and something much more inhuman that emerges from the darkness. It's a film that won't appeal to all tastes, but *Unwelcome* is striking and singular and a very welcome addition to the ranks of quirky British genre movies.

PAUL MOUNT



KNOCK AT THE CABIN

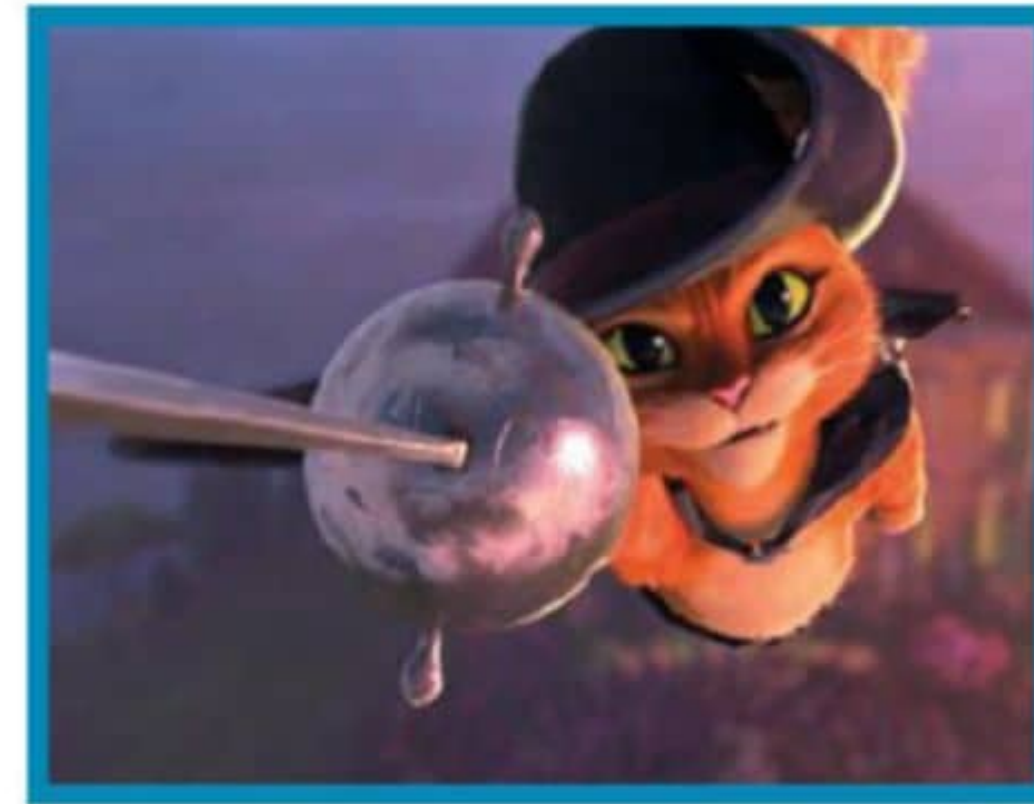
RELEASE DATE: APRIL 24TH



M. Night Shyamalan, Hollywood's most frustratingly inconsistent director, scores a welcome and much-needed direct hit with his latest genre thriller. *Knock at the Cabin* (it's a terrible title, which itself doesn't bode well) is tense, claustrophobic, pleasantly apocalyptic, and mercifully free from the creaky dialogue and unbelievable character motivations that scuppered 2021's *Old*. Seven-year-old Wen (a charming debut by the talented Kristen Cui) is holidaying at a... well, cabin in the woods with her same-sex parents Eric (Jonathan Groff) and Andrew (Ben Aldridge). Their idyll is brutally disrupted when four strangers, armed with ugly-looking weapons and led by the imposing Leonard (the increasingly impressive Dave Bautista), present them with a stark ultimatum. The family must sacrifice one of their own to prevent an imminent apocalypse. The family is understandably sceptical – until TV news coverage shows rising tides, a deadly pandemic, and planes dropping out of the sky all around the world.

The film works because, despite an element of ambiguity inevitable in the storyline, it plays to Shyamalan's strengths in presenting ordinary people with an extraordinary dilemma and watching as the tension builds and the situation spirals out of control. Leonard and his associates (well played by Abby Quinn, Rupert Grint, and Nikki Amuka-Bird) are not necessarily mad nor bad; they're just committed and desperate. They believe that their actions, steered by dreams and visions, are the only way to save the world, and they will do whatever it takes to persuade the family to do what they see as 'the right thing'. Thrilling and sometimes disturbing, *Knock at the Cabin* at last sees Shyamalan back at the top of his game.

PAUL MOUNT



PUSS IN BOOTS: THE LAST WISH

RELEASE DATE: APRIL 24TH



The *Last Wish* catches up with our cream-lapping hero Puss (Antonio Banderas) as he reaches the scary realisation that he has used up eight of his nine lives while a dark threat calls to him. To escape his fate, Puss goes on a daring adventure to a mystical land in search of a wishing star, in hopes that it may restore his nine lives. Unfortunately for him, he is far from the only one desiring to have their wish granted.

Puss in Boots: The Last Wish is a dazzling, creative triumph. Upon viewing, Gore Verbinski's *Rango* springs to mind, a film with which it shares many outstanding qualities. The *Last Wish* isn't just an improvement on Puss' first fun solo outing way back in 2011; it's a mesmerising sequel that re-energises the *Shrek*-verse and ends with a tantalising tease. The film's CG-meets-painted animation style is absolutely gorgeous and provides a visual accompaniment that is just as impressive as the story, set against Heitor Pereira's explosive score.

The whizzpopping, wish-chasing story is fantastical groundwork for a far deeper and richer journey into what makes a good life, finding the value in what has always been in front of you, grappling with mortality, and living with anxiety. There are so many carefully crafted textures to Paul Fisher and Tommy Swerdlow's screenplay, and directors Joel Crawford and Januel Mercado joyfully let the story run free and unleash a funny, poignant and exciting torrent of imagination, sword-swinging action, and meaningfully layered family entertainment. The *Last Wish* really is the cat's whiskers.

JACK BOTTOMLEY





THE FEARWAY

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW



If Hollywood has taught us anything over the years, it's that it's probably not a good idea to go on a road trip across the dusty, deserted terrain of Middle America, because it's almost bound to end in tears. The Fearway is a surprisingly accomplished and enjoyable spin on a familiar tale, combining elements of Spielberg's *Duel* with the likes of *Jeepers Creepers* and *Dead End*.

Sarah (Shannon Dalonzo) and Michael (Justin Gordon) are travelling to visit Sarah's ailing father when they are suddenly tailgated by a black limousine. They pull in at a convenient rest stop before continuing their journey, but their pursuer returns and they somehow find themselves back at the stop. They attract the attention of its oily, creepy manager (Simon Phillips), who is keen for them to spend the night there. They set off again but can't escape either their vindictive pursuer or their ultimate destination.

Running for just 80 minutes, *The Fearway* delivers plenty of mystery and intrigue across a slightly uneven script. Initial scenes between Sarah and Michael in the car strive to establish their bantering relationship but quickly become irritating. However, the film perks up when the strange fanged creature following the couple – he's not a vampire, by the way – starts interfering with their destiny in ways they can't begin to imagine.

The resolution is quite clever if a little under-developed, the cinematography is superb for a low-budget feature, and the film works to create a sense of tension and unease rather than full-blooded horror (there's nothing gory or unpleasant here). We still wouldn't recommend a road trip across dusty America, but *The Fearway* is certainly worth hitching a ride with.

PAUL MOUNT



12 MONKEYS: THE COMPLETE SERIES

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW



The 1995 apocalyptic time-travel thriller *12 Monkeys* is one of director Terry Gilliam's most accomplished and satisfying fantasies. While Gilliam remained wholly unimpressed by plans for a TV spin-off, the resulting show ran for a creditable four seasons between 2015 and 2018. The small-screen version begins as an extended 'reimagining' of the movie's storyline, before the show's creators complicate (and arguably over-complicate) their save-the-world mission, adding in new antagonists across different timelines.

James Cole (Aaron Stanford), one of the few survivors of a catastrophic pandemic, is sent back through time to prevent the release of a devastating virus. With the help of the initially incredulous virologist Cassandra Raily (Amanda Schull), a shadowy organisation known as the Army of the 12 Monkeys are identified as the prime suspects. In 2017, Cole and Raily try to avert disaster, while in 2043 the scientists' time machine comes under threat. Seasons Two and Three add in extra time-hopping shenanigans, and significantly extend the show's mythology, while Season Four brings matters to a definitive conclusion – avoiding the fate of the cancellation cliffhanger.

Stanford and Schull make an effective, understated pairing, while Emily Hampshire relishes the role of the unhinged Jennifer Goines (a reworking of Brad Pitt's Jeffrey Goines from the film). The show cannot match the extraordinary design of Gilliam's film, but – given the budget available to a Syfy Original – the on-screen execution is convincing. There's nothing really groundbreaking here, but this is dependable and diverting serial genre TV, and a solid small-screen adaptation.

RICH CROSS



VENGEANCE

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW



Vengeance marks B. J. Novak's feature debut as both a director and writer. Behind the camera, Novak is undoubtedly best known for his work on the US version of *The Office* (on which he also played Ryan). *Vengeance* feels distinctly like Novak's work, though cut free of the writers' room that used to provide his writing with a certain degree of Hollywood sheen. Without the likes of Greg Daniels doing a pass over Novak's script, *Vengeance* feels raw and somewhat undefined, but all the more personal for it.

As well as writing and directing, Novak plays the film's lead, Ben Manalowitz, a New York-based writer who is compelled to attend the Texas funeral of a woman he used to hook up with after discovering he seemingly meant much, much more to her than she did to him. One thing leads to another and he soon finds himself producing a podcast about her family's delusion that she was murdered.

After an admittedly slow start, *Vengeance* kicks into extremely compelling gear as Ben begins to question if her family are onto something. Much like the true crime podcasts that inspire its plot, whenever the film begins to run out of steam, we're hit with a gigantic left-turn that completely reinvigorates the story.

Vengeance is far from perfect. It's messy, but it's also a remarkable debut that should leave no doubt that Novak will one day write and direct a masterpiece should he continue making films. Here's hoping.

SOL HARRIS





V/H/S/99

RELEASE DATE: MARCH 27TH

15 • Blu-ray DVD SHUDDER

After breaking Shudder records with V/H/S/94, the found footage anthology franchise returns with an entry set in 1999. Taking in punk bands, kids' game shows, and Jackass-style pranksters, this is an authentically scuzzy instalment and one of the nastiest of the series, thanks to filmmakers Maggie Levin, Johannes Roberts, Flying Lotus, Tyler MacIntyre, and Joseph and Vanessa Winter.

Opener Shredding is grisly but offers little besides lurid splatter and gory makeup; the scares drop when Suicide Bid does. It's simple but effective, throwing a double-whammy of claustrophobia and arachnophobia at our tormented heroine (Ally Ioannides). Be warned!

However, the anthology's standout tale comes with Flying Lotus' Ozzy's Dungeon, which is part-Legends of the Hidden Temple, part-Saw film. Featuring a standout performance from Steven Ogg, it drastically switches gears not once but twice and boasts some gag-worthy use of gore and bodily fluids.

After that, MacIntyre's The Gawkers is disappointing, even if its depiction of a certain type of creep rings true. Scares are minimal, the CGI is rough, and the twist was done far better in the first V/H/S movie.

Thankfully, the film goes out on a high with the Winters' To Hell and Back. The madcap energy of the directors' recent Deadstream gives the film its best action sequences and gnarliest creature designs. If one of these shorts deserves a spin-off feature, it's this one, confirming the Winters as two of the most exciting directors working in found footage today.

As ever with this franchise, the segments vary wildly in quality. Still, V/H/S/99 has a higher hit rate than previous instalments and replicates the visuals and sensibilities of the era well.

JOEL HARLEY



JANUARY

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

12 • Apple TV Amazon Prime

Somewhere in the Bulgarian countryside, in the depths of the bleakest of winters, an abandoned housing complex provides shelter from the elements for two individuals known only as The Guard and The Old Man. Scratching out a living preparing expensive treats for faraway city dwellers, both are wary of the dangers lurking in the surrounding woods but take comfort in the company of a caged bird. When visitors unexpectedly arrive, the extent of the pair's vulnerability and the nature of the threat hiding in the trees is revealed.

January is the feature debut of documentary filmmaker Andrey Paounov. Adapted from a 1970s theatre script, the film adopts a highly stylised and abstract storytelling style. It's clear that the plot serves as a metaphor, albeit an opaque one. Are the events of January a post-apocalyptic allegory, a lament for post-Soviet pauperisation, or a salutary warning about nature's growing impatience with human folly? Perhaps the whole affair is a twisted fantasy, a dream within a dream, or a descent into insanity?

Fittingly for a film set during a ferocious winter, January is glacially slow. Paounov's interest is in building atmosphere and exploring the dynamics of ill-matched human relationships through lengthy dialogue (punctuated with long pauses). While precious little happens, cinematographer Vasco Viana delivers vivid black-and-white visuals, and the musical score by Ivo Paunov is suitably edgy. Paounov also includes absurdly outlandish moments of humour and gentle nods to his cinematic influences. January won the Special Jury Prize at the Golden Rose Film Festival, but it's the kind of unusual arthouse flick that will polarise opinion and leave many mainstream viewers cold.

RICH CROSS



ROYAL WARRIORS (1986)

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

15 • Blu-ray

Michelle Yeoh's wardrobe is phenomenal in this film; we are first introduced to her CID officer as she's taking out some Yakuza in Japan while sporting a baggy white jacket and bright blue top. On her flight home, two criminals try and take over the plane, but she manages to stop them with the help of a Japanese detective (Peter Yamamoto) and a flight marshal (an irritating Michael Wong). It turns out that the hijackers were part of a sworn criminal brotherhood formed in Vietnam, whose surviving members will now do anything to avenge their fallen brothers.

Despite some 1980s cheese, David Chung's film plays it straight, with some surprisingly harrowing moments – the villains become increasingly evil and are willing to blow up families and desecrate graves! Unlike in Yes, Madam, Yeoh is the true star of the film, excelling in some fantastic action scenes choreographed by Mang Hoi, including a brilliant plane sequence and a shoot-out in a neon-soaked bar. Only Wong's tiresome wooing of Yeoh's character and a slightly silly ending involving a tank detract from a sublime effort from the golden age of Hong Kong cinema.

The disc is a little basic: there's a commentary provided by Frank Djeng and Mike Leeder (the latter getting more distracted by the minute), a location feature with Arne Venema, and a too-short interview with producer John Sham. The transfer is great, however, so if you want to familiarise yourself with Michelle Yeoh's early career, then you could do much worse than to pick this up.

JACOB WALKER





WAKALIWOOD SUPA ACTION VOL. 1

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

15 • Blu-ray

Straight from the slums of Wakaliga in the Ugandan capital of Kampala, Supa Action Vol. 1 features two films from Nabwana IGG, a self-taught filmmaker who gained a cult following after the trailer for his first movie caught the attention of online film fans in 2010. Here, that film – the action-

comedy Who Killed Captain Alex? – is accompanied by 2016's Bad Black by the same director.

In 'Uganda's first action movie', Captain Alex is murdered during his quest to take down the Tiger Mafia, leaving his comrades to finish the job and track down his killer. Meanwhile, in Bad Black, an American doctor receives kung fu training (from a child named Wesley Snipes) in order to get revenge on the leader of a local crime syndicate. Given the conditions and

technology that the films utilised (neither budget stretched over \$200), the overall quality is expectedly low in every conventional sense – but the action, dialogue and 'special effects' are so entertaining and the cast's enthusiasm is so contagious that it's difficult not to enjoy the ride.

Both films are supplied with narration from VJ ('video joker') Emmie, who gives a taste of one of the quirkiest aspects of the Ugandan cinema-viewing experience as he pokes fun at the action, shouts at the actors onscreen, and generally sounds like he's having the time of his life. There's also a crazy amount of extras, including two film festival Q&As, music videos, commentary tracks, 'behind the scenes' footage from Bad Black, trailers, commercials, clips, and more than two hours' worth of international press coverage. 'Da best of da best', indeed!

CHRIS JACKSON



NOCEDO

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

18 • Blu-ray DVD

We all get stressed at work, but hopefully not to the level of fashion designer Christine, the protagonist of Lorcan Finnegan's latest mystery-horror, Nocebo.

Shot in Ireland, this psychological thriller stars Eva Green as a childrenswear designer who, after hearing some shocking news, becomes afflicted by a mysterious illness for which she needs rigorous treatment, even after eight months. Her husband Felix (Mark Strong) and daughter

Roberta (Billie Gadsdon) struggle to help Christine until a stranger from the Philippines, Diana (Chai Fonacier), turns up at their house to assist with caring for the mother. But, after some unusual healing practices, Diana reveals that Christine is hiding a horrifying secret.

From a stylistic standpoint, Nocebo is a fascinating film. It is presented in an abnormal aspect ratio, instantly imposing a certain unease and creating a sense of claustrophobia. The muted colour palette also helps encapsulate the audience in the otherworldly illness that the protagonist is experiencing. Characters and important objects are meticulously placed, framed, and coloured, once again demonstrating Finnegan's superb eye for directing.

However, the finished product falters in its overly obscure and mind-boggling second act, with some story threads not being tied up while a not-so-subtle message gets hammered home, dampening the overall experience. Fortunately, Fonacier and Green's performances are never short of captivating.

A gorgeously presented film, Nocebo's overall story and bizarre midsection make it a worthwhile watch, even as it leaves you scratching your head and being hit in the face with a haphazardly handled message about the West's exploitation of Eastern labour.

JAMES PERKINS





MISTER CREEP

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW



Detailing a group of college students' efforts to improve their CV with a student film about missing persons, their work soon takes them to something greater, something that won't just get them a top grade but could make American history. When they come upon an Internet urban legend of a masked serial killer who filmed and murdered over 200 people, they decide to find the tapes; unfortunately, the murderer was executed 20 years prior and all evidence of his crimes has since been buried by the authorities. As their search goes on, the students' digging will also unearth a killer's disturbing history.

The concept is perfect for the found footage format and director Isaac Rodriguez delivers his story effectively, making the utmost use of a low budget along the way, while his cast offer strong and realistic performances that help the film flourish. Amber Lee Solis, who becomes central to this group of characters, delivers a particularly brilliant turn.

Integrating a supernatural element on top of the story's thematic exploration of the American Dream, the darkness behind the ideal and our unsettling fascination with it, and the pursuit of legacy and renown in moviemaking, Mister Creep certainly tackles a lot in its brief 76 minutes. Admittedly, it may lose focus at points, or stretch believability, but it never loses its plot. The film continually delivers an effective horror experience with a central villain who proves appropriately creepy – not to mention a nasty little doll!

JACK BOTTOMLEY



THE CURSE OF ROSALIE

RELEASE DATE: MARCH 13TH

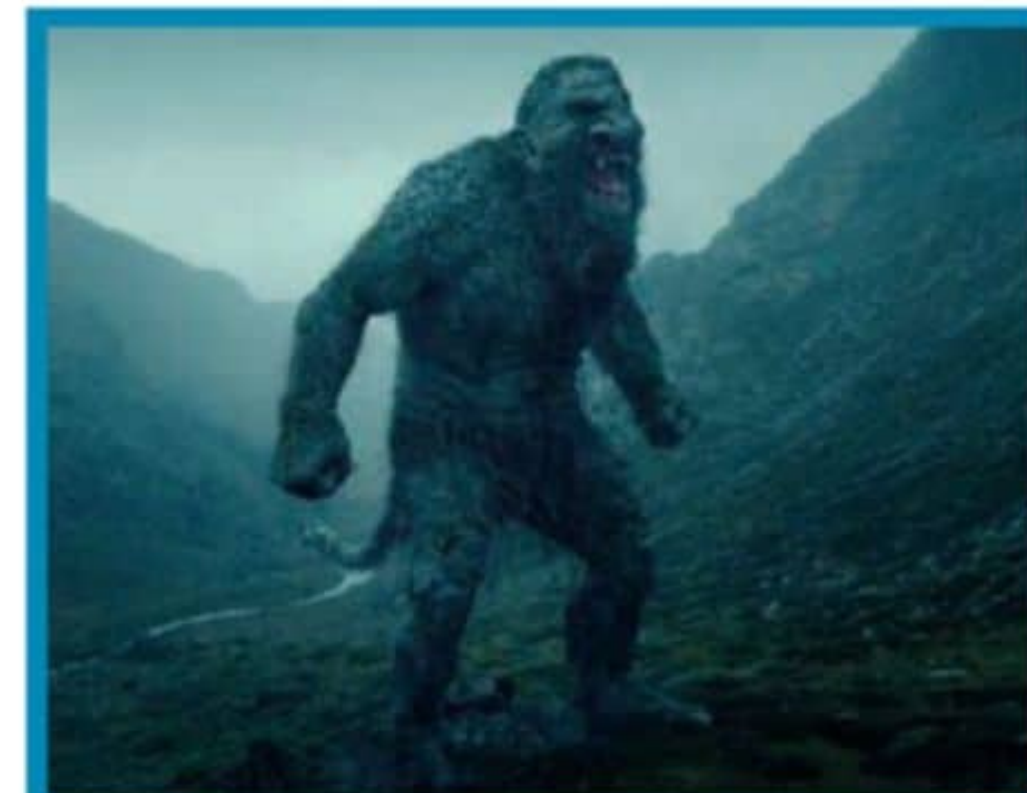


Rosalie (Madeleine McGraw) is a creepy kid. At a funeral, she says she can see the dead man burning in hell. Her parents, Daniel (Will Klipstine, who co-wrote and directed the film) and Theresa (Amanda MacDonald) have home-schooled Rosalie, and are continually moving towns for Daniel's 'work'. A seemingly warm welcome to their latest home turns sour when Rosalie is involved in a few incidents with the local children. There's also a series of murders that begins. Questions are raised, and how does the nearby Native American reservation fit in?

Originally entitled The Harbinger (which makes more sense as the picture pans out), Klipstine's film is a mess of ideas, going from possession tale to demon without breaking a sweat. Despite that, it's a fun ride. McGraw is suitably sinister as the budding Wednesday Addams, spouting pronouncements that are more threatening than kooky, but despite the title change, she's not the primary focus of the story. There are a few genuinely eerie moments amongst the nonsense, but you get the impression Klipstine's story is trying too hard to tick several horror boxes and serve too many masters. It's only moderately successful, and when it fails, it doesn't totally derail things.

Overblown but entertaining, familiar but enduring, the story seems rushed despite being just under two hours. The climactic sequence has the feel of the type of movie that was commonplace in the height of the video rental boom (1978's The Evil comes to mind). Low-budget films tend to come with a caveat due to their limited resources; The Curse of Rosalie takes advantage of this goodwill, but won't be for everyone.

MARTIN UNSWORTH



TROLL

RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW



The story of Roar Uthaug's Troll is a thing of beautiful simplicity, and for once we're not complaining. The Norwegian government calls in palaeontologist Nora Tidenham (Ine Marie Wilmann) to find out what happened to a group of protesters killed in the mountains of Dovre. For this, Nora teams up with the Norwegian Prime Minister's advisor – and the film's comic relief – Andreas (Kim Falck) and military muscle Kris Holm (Mads Sjøgård Pettersen). Nora's slightly fruit loop father Tobias (Gard B. Eidsvold) may have lost his professional credibility and his job because of his fervent belief in the existence of mythical monsters, but Nora soon discovers an incredible truth: Trolls are real, and a very large one is causing carnage as it wanders through the country.

The human characters are a quirky, likeable bunch, sure, but we're all really here for the troll action. The film sparkles in a handful of key sequences and, while we may not be talking Godzilla-level devastation here, Troll is all the better for not sacrificing its soul and heart for the sake of tiresome scenes of wanton destruction. The movie has real heart; once we learn of the history of the trolls and their tragic fate at the hands of the early Christians, it's hard not to pity the creature and feel some genuine sympathy for its plight.

Thrilling, fast-paced, funny and with a genuinely emotional, beating heart, Troll is a terrific treat. We're certainly keeping our fingers crossed for the sequel cheekily teased during the end credits. A monstrously good film.

PAUL MOUNT





THE BAD BATCH

REVIEWED: SEASON 2 (EPISODES 1-8)



The second season of The Bad Batch, Dave Filoni's Clone Wars spin-off, sees Clone Force 99 licking their wounds following the explosive conclusion to Season One, quickly diving back into sporadic adventures across the galaxy. Meanwhile, the Empire learns that the rogue units did indeed survive what happened on Kamino, and the Galactic Senate is pressing ahead with plans to decommission the old Clone Army.

The Bad Batch offers plenty for the loyal Star Wars fan, although sometimes it dives too deep into the wider universe for even the most knowledgeable of viewers. Some filler episodes are inevitable, of course, but here they seem to drag on, particularly with characters that, for now at least, are of minimal interest. Much like the outstanding Andor, The Bad Batch works at its best as an intense but kid-friendly political thriller; Episodes 3, 7, and 8 are testimony to that and are easily the highlights so far. At its worst, however, the show is a slog, especially now the relationship between Omega and the Batch is firmly established and itself yields less narrative fruit.

The distinctive animation style holds up for its detail and when the action comes, it makes for some solid entertainment. Michelle Ang is yet again a wonder as Omega, giving a complete sense of her increasing maturity in a rapidly changing galaxy, and several members of the squad get satisfying stories of their own, culminating in a poignant goodbye in Episode 8. Season Two isn't yet up to the standard of what came before, but is ticking the boxes.

JAMES HANTON



LITTLE DEMON

REVIEWED: SEASON 1



From the co-creator of Rick and Morty [*Not that one - Ed*] comes a new series about a young girl who's about to enter puberty. So far, so Big Mouth, right? Thing is, along with the usual changes, Chrissy also gets some strange powers, and via her mum, she finds out that she is the Antichrist and her dad is Satan himself.

They have been moving house regularly so Laura could try to hide Chrissy from her dad, but now he has a fix on her and rocks up in an effort to get his daughter onside and bring about the Apocalypse.

Chrissy is juggling high school, puberty, her newfound powers, and an absentee father who is suddenly back on the scene. This makes for some very funny interactions among a very unusual family. Add to this nosy neighbours, school friends, and demons hell-bent on killing the Antichrist, and you're left with a series that, littered with foul-mouthed tirades by everyone and enough nudity to make a Naked Attraction viewer blush, works brilliantly as short, animated episodes.

It's entertaining to hear Danny DeVito voice the Lord of Darkness and Aubrey Plaza as the kick-ass mum trying to protect her daughter from a toxic father. Of course, occasionally they need to work together for the sake of Chrissy, and the neighbourhood seems almost too easily accepting of the events unfolding around them, but realism is not the point of the show. This is lots of fun, even if you don't like Rick and Morty.

JD GILLIAM



NOLLY

REVIEWED: SEASON 1



A three-part drama chronicling the fall from grace of a forgotten soap star from a forgotten soap opera doesn't sound like the most enticing viewing proposition. But in the hands of master storyteller Russell T Davies, Nolly, starring Helena Bonham Carter, delivers a broad, camp, high energy look at a long-gone world of British television. In doing so, he brings the extraordinary life and times of a TV icon from a bygone age back into the modern public consciousness.

Incredibly, from the 1960s to the early 1980s, Noele Gordon was an indomitable award-winning fixture on British TV, largely thanks to her career-defining role as Meg Richardson (later Mortimer), the matriarchal owner of the Crossroads Motel in the Midlands village of King's Oak. Micro-budget soap opera Crossroads was a massive hit, much to the chagrin of its makers at ATV; the controversial, overnight sacking of Gordon from the series in 1981 was a national talking point for months.

Davies, fascinated by the minutiae of the history of TV, has explored the myths surrounding Gordon's sacking and attempted to give it some perspective and meaning in three episodes of gloriously silly, joyous, and uplifting telly laced with tragedy and triumph. Bonham Carter embraces the showbiz magnificence of Gordon, and Mark Gatiss is in full League of Gentleman mode as Nolly's best friend, equally-forgotten camp comic Larry Grayson.

Nolly is a beautiful celebration of a golden age of British TV, a tale of betrayal, friendship, hope, and despair, a powerful woman trampled down by more powerful men but determined to hold her head high and fight her way back against overwhelming odds. It's Davies at his non-Who best; it's very wonderful, indeed.

PAUL MOUNT





STAR TREK: PICARD

REVIEWED: SEASON 3 (EPISODES 1-6)

prime video

When Picard began in 2020, it presented a chance at a proper send-off for the crew of the Enterprise, following 2002's underwhelming Star Trek: Nemesis. Unfortunately, the series was underwhelming, with the second season proving a particularly

low point.

Enter Terry Matalas. The former 12 Monkeys showrunner has taken over the reins and reinvented the show from the ground up. Gone are most of the supporting cast and, in their place, Matalas has brought back the entire cast of The Next Generation. However, this is very much a sequel to, and not a continuation of, that show. Characters have moved on in the last 20 years, with none of the crew

having heard from Beverly Crusher in decades. Her sudden reappearance in Picard's life – along with the reason for her absence – is central to this season's plot.

It's hard to overstate how great it is seeing these characters together again. Some have stayed in touch, others haven't seen each other in years, and the various reunions and transformed relationships are a joy to witness and explore. New cast members Ed Speleers, Todd Stashwick, and Amanda Plummer as the scenery-chewing villain Vadic are also great additions.

To say Season Three is an improvement on every level is an understatement: it feels like Star Trek again. The revamped Picard is easily the best season of Trek since the franchise's return in 2017. Hell, it may well be the best season of Trek since Deep Space Nine. If this is the last outing for Picard and co., it's a great one; if there's more to come, then yes, please. After all, not all good things have to come to an end.

IAIN ROBERTSON



THE LAST OF US

REVIEWED: SEASON 1

sky atlantic NOW

Penned by award-winning writer Craig Mazin and by Neil Druckmann, the creator of the acclaimed video games on which the series is based, The Last of Us pitch-perfectly encapsulates the source material,

and then some.

Twenty years after a viral outbreak of Cordyceps in humans annihilates the majority of the population, a now-hardened apocalypse veteran, Joel (Pedro Pascal), must venture across the infected wasteland of America with Ellie (Bella Ramsey), a young girl who could hold the key to developing a cure for the fungi-based pandemic. The pair initially don't care for one another, but gradually form

an unbreakable bond that has us fully invested.

Some of the story beats and lore that are hardwired into the brains of diehard fans of the video games have changed, but this is to be welcomed, as no one wants a shot-for-shot retelling. Character arcs are fleshed out, certain set pieces are altered to fit with the tone and narrative of a particular episode or substory, and locations are subtly changed to hint at the larger story ahead in the already-confirmed second season.

The production design is exceptional, drawing you into the world as well as Joel and Ellie's story. Fans of the source material are rewarded with nods and Easter eggs aplenty, while new viewers are not alienated – a difficult balancing act, but one that the showrunners pull off perfectly.

The Last of Us could be the greatest video game adaptation available today. It'll pull at your heartstrings.

JAMES PERKINS





THE LEGEND OF VOX MACHINA

REVIEWED: SEASON 2

prime video

Despite Wizards of the Coast's best efforts, Dungeons & Dragons is still a cultural phenomenon with millions of fans. The Legend of Vox Machina is a D&D-adjacent franchise; it started as a bunch of voice actors playing D&D on a livestream called Critical Role and, thanks to the combined efforts of Kickstarter and Prime, has become an animated TV show.

Season One felt like a fluke, but now that we have Season Two, it feels like the Critical Role franchise is here to stay. The greatest challenge is taking the hundreds of hours' worth of livestream and turning them into twelve 30-minute animated shows. The core story, in which a world's biggest dragons go on a kaiju-style rampage and a party of heroes go looking for artefacts to stop them, works very well.

However, while some of the choices of storyline are interesting, we linger too long on trivial things like 'where did this character get this magic item from' or 'isn't this new character cool' and not the memorable moments from the source material, such as the relationships between posh boy Percy and the vagabond twins Vex and Vax. Some of the jokes that were hilarious on the livestream get redone here and just don't work when it's a scripted line rather than an off-the-cuff remark.

It feels like too much time is spent distancing the show from its D&D roots, whilst hanging onto the less interesting elements of the original story. Still, it's a fun adult anime-style adventure and well worth a watch if you're into high fantasy and silly humour.

ED FORTUNE



LOCKWOOD & CO.

REVIEWED: SEASON 1

NETFLIX

Adapted from the award-winning book series of the same name by Jonathan Stroud, Lockwood & Co. has been brought to the screen by Joe Cornish (Attack the Block).

In an alternative version of modern-day England, ghosts (known as Visitors) roam the world, resulting in a nationwide curfew. Since these spirits have been around, young people have developed abilities to fight them. The story follows Lucy Carlyle, Anthony Lockwood, and George Karim, the three members of an independent agency called Lockwood & Co.

What stands out straight away about this adaptation is how, although the source material is aimed at young adults, it doesn't shy away from the scares and the deeper, adult themes. The set pieces and production design ooze character and some moments are genuinely thrilling and spinechilling.

The three leads, portrayed by Ruby Stokes, Cameron Chapman, and Ali Hadji-Heshmati, have an infectious chemistry as the story progresses, which really drives home the angle of these young people having to grow up and be responsible beyond their years because of the world they live in.

Across the eight episodes, which cover the narrative of the first two books, the wider world is teased and expanded without being shown. This means that if Netflix renew Lockwood & Co. for Season 2 (which we think they should!), then there is plenty more of this universe to explore with these great characters and concepts.

JAMES PERKINS



VELMA

REVIEWED: SEASON 1

[COMING SOON]

There's a modern show that takes ideas from old-school cartoons such as 1969's Scooby-Doo, Where Are You! and adds an air of cynicism and humour to the mix to create something entirely new. It was called The Venture Bros. and it was cancelled in 2018. We bring it up because it's everything that HBO Max's new 'kids cartoon for adults' show, Velma, wishes it was but utterly fails to be.

The premise of Velma is pretty simple – take the Scooby-Doo gang and put them in a Riverdale-style drama, with angry teenagers sniping at each constantly. Turn the spooky monster of the week into a horrific serial killer, abandon the goofy green van, and completely forget about the dog. Add the vocal talents of The Mindy Project's Mindy Kaling as an acerbic, bitter, and manipulative version of Velma Dinkley and make everyone else more unlikeable.

The result is a nasty, almost unwatchable mess. It has a nicely simple animation style, but one that belongs on a better show. The Scooby-Doo franchise has been remixed endlessly since the '60s, but the core decency of the main characters has always been the main appeal. Turn Daphne into a vapid prom queen or Fred into a literal man-child and the charm evaporates, turning the whole thing into yet another vaguely spooky drama. It's a show that feels like it hates not only the audience, but itself, going out of the way to insult its viewers.

It's not edgy, it's not clever, it's not new, and it's not meant to be enjoyed. Avoid.

ED FORTUNE





MAYFAIR WITCHES

REVIEWED: SEASON 1

[COMING SOON]

Best known for her vampire texts, such as *Interview with the Vampire*, Anne Rice also explored other areas of the macabre with a trilogy of witchcraft novels, which began in 1990 with *The Witching Hour* and followed a family known as the

Mayfair Witches. AMC acquired the rights to all Rice's works in 2020 – with the indulgently entertaining version of *Interview* being released in 2022 – and now we have the equally lavish production of Anne Rice's *Mayfair Witches* to visually stimulate us.

And visually stimulate it does, with its atmospheric, Gothic New Orleans setting, and a series of glitzy balls and parties, both joyful and funereal. The costumes are striking, the sets

suitably bewitching, and the strong direction guides you skilfully through this world. But there is something – dare we say it? – sadly rather bland about this witchy tale.

The story follows Alexandra Daddario's Rowan as she discovers her part in a family she knew nothing about, while learning to control her emerging powers. *Mayfair Witches* has a time-jumping narrative that spans generations, but never really engages as much as it should. There is an interesting story here, albeit a tentatively ponderous one that's somewhat peripheral to the main events. Interesting characters flit in and out – Harry Hamlin devours the extravagant scenery as an outrageous uncle while Jack Huston broods as the mysterious Lasher – though Daddario is sadly too bland to hold full attention as the central character.

As beautiful as *Mayfair Witches* is, it is a disappointingly passive beauty when compared to its toothier, more aggressive cousin.

JOHN TOWNSEND



EXTRAORDINARY

REVIEWED: SEASON 1



With superhero movies being pretty much the default, it's no surprise that the superhero parody has also become commonplace. This means that Disney+'s new super-powered comedy show, *Extraordinary*, can go

in deep with its high-concept premise without alienating its audience.

Extraordinary is a decidedly British show, not just because it's set in London but also because of its down-to-earth and sardonic tone. The central idea is that superpowers are very common – almost everyone has one, and as a rule, they aren't that useful. Super-strength makes it easy to break stuff, being able to control technology is worthless

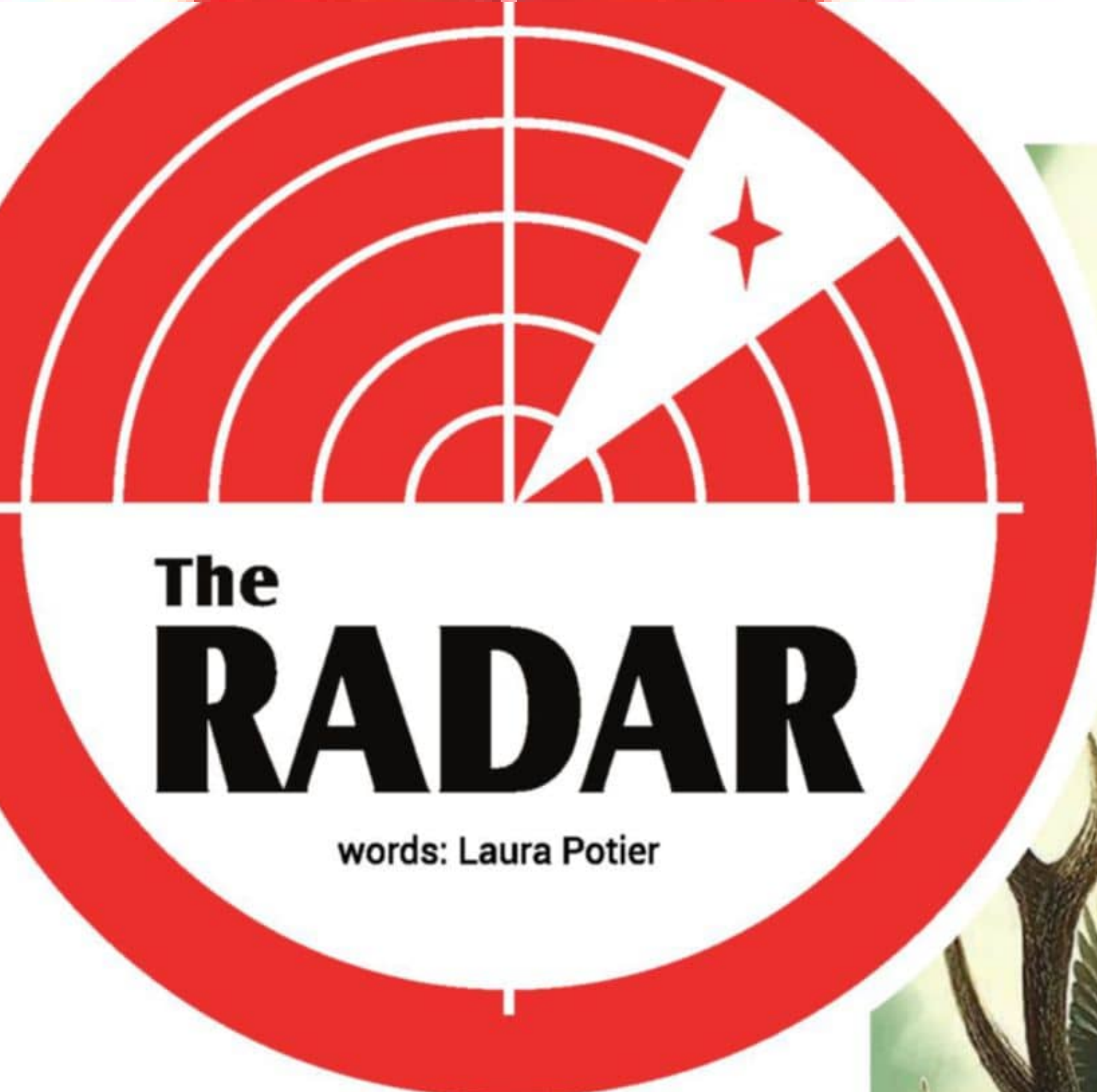
if you don't understand it, flight is tiring, and so on. However, our main character, the twenty-something Jen, wouldn't know, because her power never manifested.

Yes, it's a comedy metaphor for feeling like a failure in your mid-twenties. Jen still lives with Carrie, her childhood best friend, and like most comedy protagonists, is neither very bright nor very kind. Though the central drama is predictable 'slice of life' stuff, the show stays fresh thanks to its ridiculous worldbuilding. This is a place where you can't even adopt a pet without worrying it might have superpowers, after all.

Extraordinary doesn't really stand out from similar takes on the same idea; 2008's *No Heroics* had more slapstick and Neil Gaiman's *Temp*s had better worldbuilding, for example. But as a silly British comedy show to watch while you're waiting for the next Marvel TV series to appear, it does the job pretty well.

ED FORTUNE





The RADAR

words: Laura Potier

Your at-a-glance guide to the other most notable new releases heading our way over the coming months...

MARCH

SCREAM VI

10th

The action moves away from Woodsboro to the big city, where Ghostface is once again stalking the Carpenter sisters and co. The latest entry has promisingly been described as “grittier and rawer” than 2022’s excellent **Scream** – though, as any NYC commuter will tell you, a small-town serial killer is hardly the worst thing you’re likely to encounter on the subway.

65

10th

65, aka Adam Driver vs. dinosaurs. Kylo Ren is momentarily back in space, at least until his ship crashes on an unknown planet. Armed with a phaser and some great facial hair, he and fellow survivor Koa make their way across dangerous terrain riddled with prehistoric creatures in hopes of being rescued. We advise you to skip the trailer, as it gives away a pretty major plot point.



SCHOOL SPIRITS (SEASON 1)

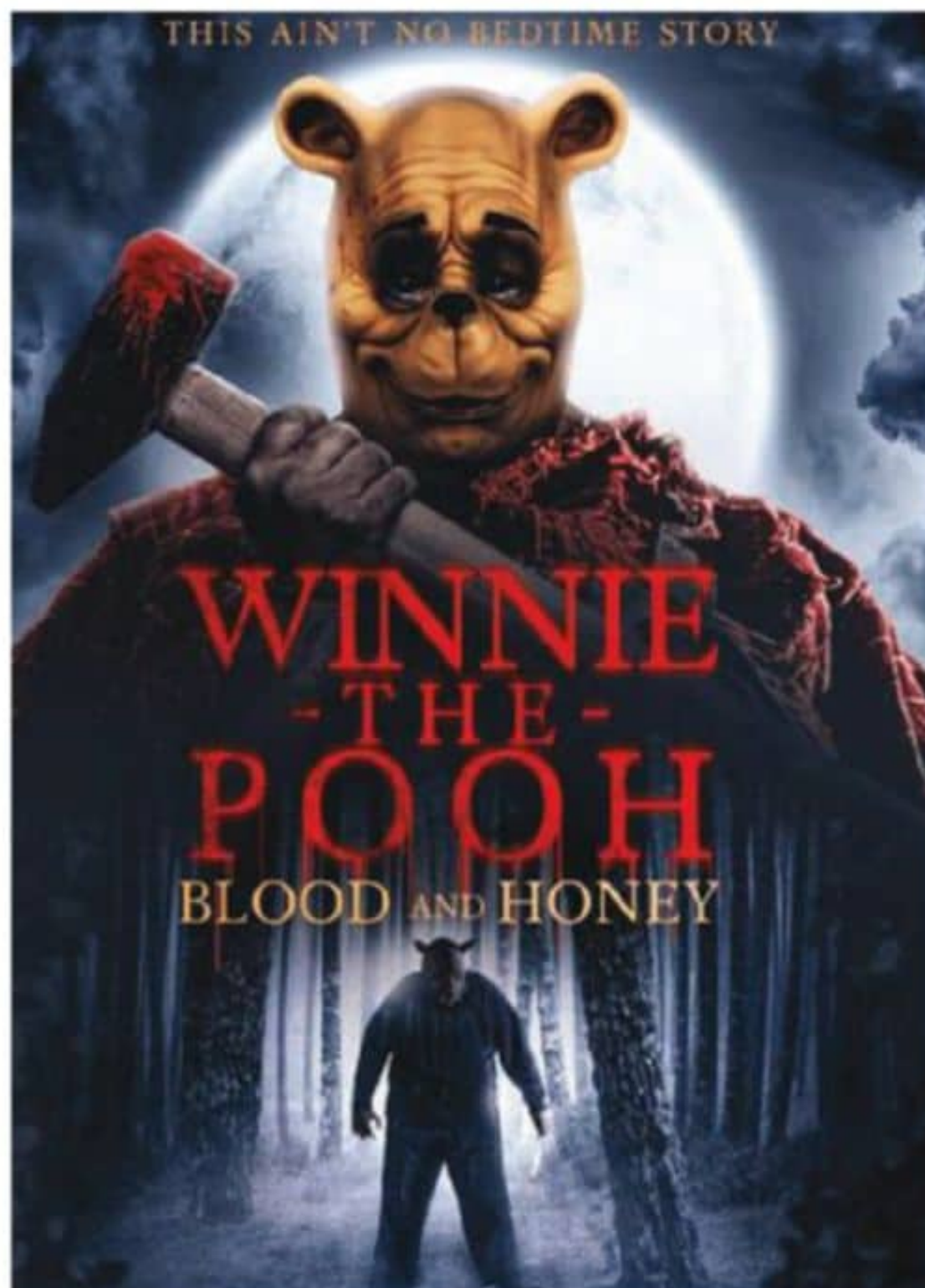
10th

You think death is bad? Imagine dying AND being stuck in high school for all eternity. Now that’s horror. In **School Spirits** (not to be confused with the Syfy documentary series of the same name), Peyton List stars as a teen who decides to investigate her disappearance, along with a group of other dead students who are also stuck in limbo.

WINNIE-THE-POOH: BLOOD AND HONEY

10th

This title surely needs no introduction, but here it is anyway: Pooh and Piglet have become bloodthirsty murderers on a violent rampage as they seek revenge against Christopher Robin and humanity at large for abandoning them. Oh, and there’s a sequel already in the works.



SHADOW AND BONE (SEASON 2)

16th

We hope you got your kefta dry-cleaned because, after a near-two-year wait, a return to the Grishaverse is imminent. After the first season finale’s explosive events, Season 2 will see the Darkling return to Ravka, armed with new powers and flanked by some Shadow Fold beasts. Alina had better watch her back...

SHAZAM! FURY OF THE GODS

17th

Billy Batson and his foster siblings, aka the Shazamily, are forced back into action to defeat the Daughters of Atlas (played by Helen Mirren, Lucy Liu, and Rachel Zegler), ancient deities furious that Shazam and his siblings stole the powers of the gods. And if that didn’t sound like enough fun, there are also dragons, unicorns, minotaurs, and a bunch of other mythical creatures thrown in the mix! See page 48 for our interview with the director David F. Sandberg and star Zachary Levi.



PEARL

17th

The wonderful Mia Goth returns in this prequel to Ti West’s **X**, reprising her role as a younger Pearl. Stuck on her family’s isolated farm in 1918 Texas and forced to tend to her ailing father under the disapproving watch of her devout mother, Pearl fervently pursues stardom as a means of escape. When her ambition leads to frustration, however, the young woman’s growing anger and resentment will threaten the lives of all close to her.

PLAY DEAD

17th

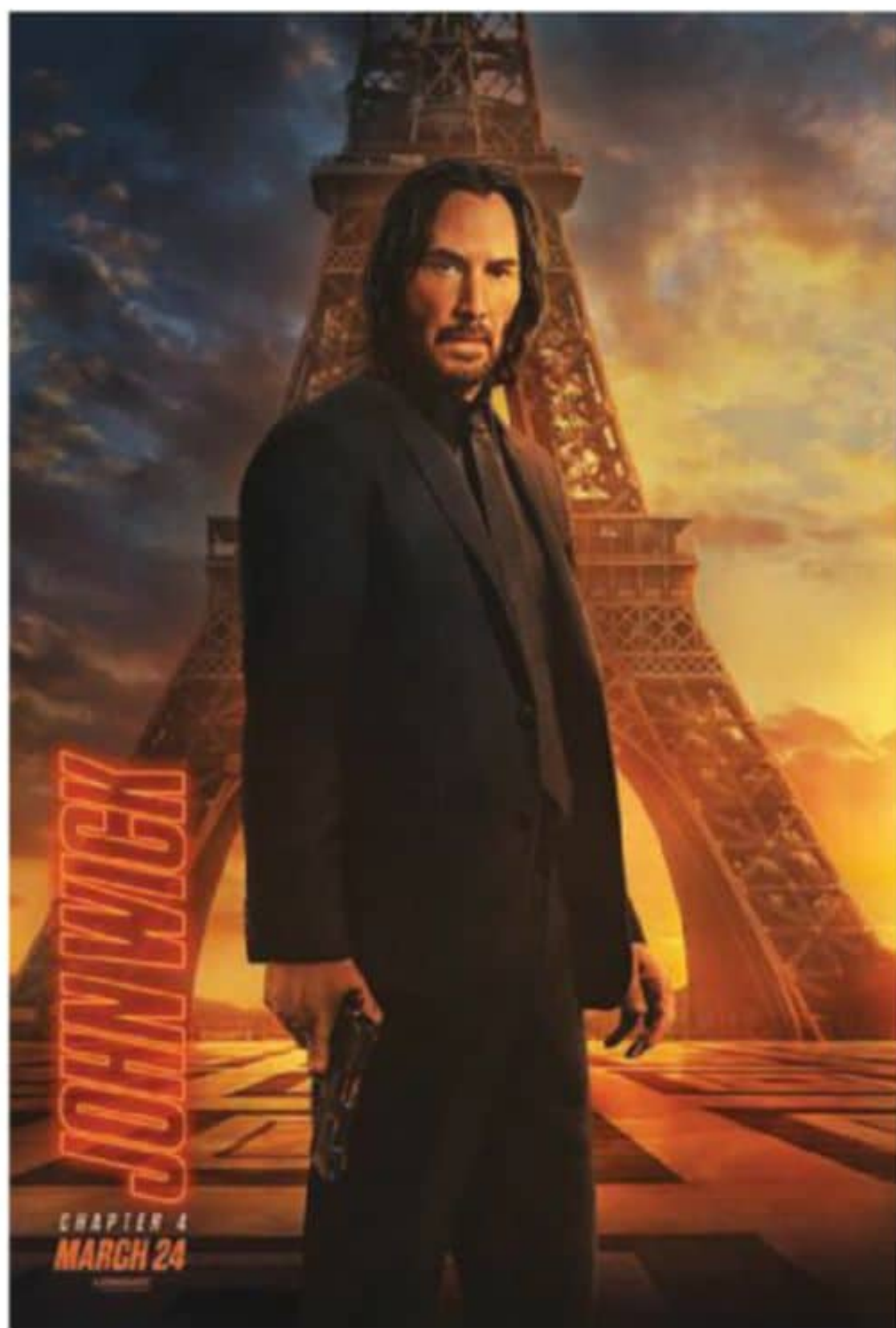
Surely there are easier ways of breaking into a morgue than faking your own death. Nonetheless, that’s what criminology student Chloe opts to do in order to retrieve a piece of evidence that ties her younger brother to a crime gone awry. Things only get worse from then, as she learns that the coroner is using the morgue as a front for a twisted business.



JOHN WICK: CHAPTER 4

24th

Action cinema's dog-loving, sword-wielding, best-dressed mercenary is back and as intent as ever on bringing down the High Table. First, though, he needs to defeat some powerful new baddies from Berlin to Osaka – throw Donnie Yen and Bill Skarsgård into the mix as franchise newcomers, and you've got yourself a globe-trotting murder party!



YELLOWJACKETS (SEASON 2)

24th

Audiences went feral for the **Lord of the Flies**-style series, whose initial run followed a high school football team whose plane crashed in the Canadian wilderness; through two timelines, we saw the teens struggle to survive in the aftermath of the crash, as well as the survivors' lives 25 years later. We might not know much about Season 2, but we're buzzing about it.



MUMMIES

31st

The animated comedy film follows three Egyptian mummies (the dead, bandaged-up kind, not the harried, child-having kind) and their pet baby crocodile as they navigate present-day London in search of an old ring belonging to the Royal Family, stolen in classic British behaviour by archaeologist Lord Carnaby.

THE POWER (SEASON 1)

31st

A series adaptation of Naomi Alderman's feminist fantasy novel, **The Power** imagines what the world would look like if teenage girls suddenly developed the ability to electrocute people. And to cement this show as a must-watch, we'll just add that genre queen Toni Collette is starring!

APRIL

THE SUPER MARIO BROS MOVIE

7th

Nintendo's turtle-stomping plumber is back for a colourful and star-studded adventure through the Mushroom Kingdom, as Mario and Princess Peach journey to save a kidnapped Luigi from Bowser.



DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: HONOR AMONG THIEVES

7th

Chris Pine heads up a merry band of misfits as they embark on an epic quest to retrieve a powerful and long-lost relic, overcoming dangerous foes and magical obstacles on the way. With the directors of the excellent **Game Night** as dungeon masters, it's possible this **D&D** feature adaptation will roll a 20.

RENFIELD

14th

We absolutely *cannot* wait to sink our fangs into this comedy-horror. Nicolas Cage as Dracula? Sold. Renfield in a support group for horrible bosses? Inject it straight into our veins! Need we say more? Of course not.

EVIL DEAD RISE

21st

In this fifth franchise outing, sisters Beth and Ellie, and the latter's three kids, get into a world of trouble when the Necronomicon is discovered in their LA apartment building, unleashing the Deadite horror on all the complex's inhabitants. Ready yourself for plenty of blood, guts, and demons! Check out our chat with star Alyssa Sutherland on page 32.

MAY

STAR WARS: VISIONS (VOLUME 2)

4th

The animated anthology series returns for a second outing, bringing together **Star Wars**-inspired short stories from studios around the world. This season's contributors include the always-excellent Cartoon Saloon and Aardman, so it goes without saying that we'll be tuning in.

GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY VOL. 3

17th

It's looking like an emotional end to the **Guardians** trilogy, folks, so get the tissues ready. The team are back (plus an evil, alternate-timeline Gamora) and going up against the High Evolutionary to save Rocket's life, all the while with golden boy Adam Warlock on their trail. Just a warning to any Marvel execs reading this: you had better not hurt the talking raccoon. Or else.

FEAR THE WALKING DEAD (SEASON 8)

18th

Fear the Walking Dead will end this coming season after eight years on air (a fact that hurts our brains), as the **TWD** universe sets a new course. The final season will follow Morgan, Madison, and the other dejected survivors living under PADRE's oppressive rule as they struggle to imagine a better world. Season 8 also promises to cover a lot of ground, with a seven-year time jump occurring halfway through the 12-episode run.

THE LITTLE MERMAID

24th

Remade in live-action for a new generation, this version of the classic tale sees talented singer and actor Halle Bailey take on the role of Ariel, with Melissa McCarthy as Ursula and Javier Bardem as King Triton. Though we expect it'll be a straightforward retelling, the cast looks good enough to warrant a watch.

JUNE

New STARBURST Day!

1st



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Paul Mount's



Here we go then; the first bright, shiny new issue of STARBURST for 2023 and the year stretches ahead with the promise of swathes of new shows, returning old favourites, and very probably a handful of titles that should never have reached our screens at all...

It's early days, obviously, but I'm willing to put my head on the block (not literally) and suggest that **The Last of Us** (HBO in the US, Sky Atlantic/Now in the UK) is setting a high bar for everything else coming our way this year. On the basis of the first four episodes aired at the time of writing, it's delivering a crisp, striking, and visually astonishing depiction of a post-apocalyptic world that is terrifyingly plausible and unrelentingly immersive, thought-provoking and occasionally curiously optimistic in its realisation of the end of the world and what happens next.

Quick point of order. **The Last of Us** is based on the hugely popular computer game title launched (quickly checks Wikipedia) in 2013 and developed by Naughty Dog and published by Sony Computer Entertainment. I've never played the game and I never will, so I'm approaching this TV series purely in the context of its life as a TV series so not only can I not comment about any differences or similarities between the gameplay and the TV narrative, I'm not especially interested in them. Gamers are constantly up in arms when their beloved properties are brought to the screen with little resemblance to the gaming experience, but it's inevitable that the translation from one medium to another, whether it's a film

or a TV series, is going to demand a significant element of change so it can work as a proper, developing narrative with rounded, believable characters, otherwise we're just left with episode after episode of people shooting at one another and hiding. Or **The Walking Dead** Season 8, as I prefer to call it. I understand that **The Last of Us** was famously better 'written' than many of its predecessors, with a properly thought-out storyline and engaging character relationships



threading through the carnage and chaos. But it's still a fact of life that in being brought to the small

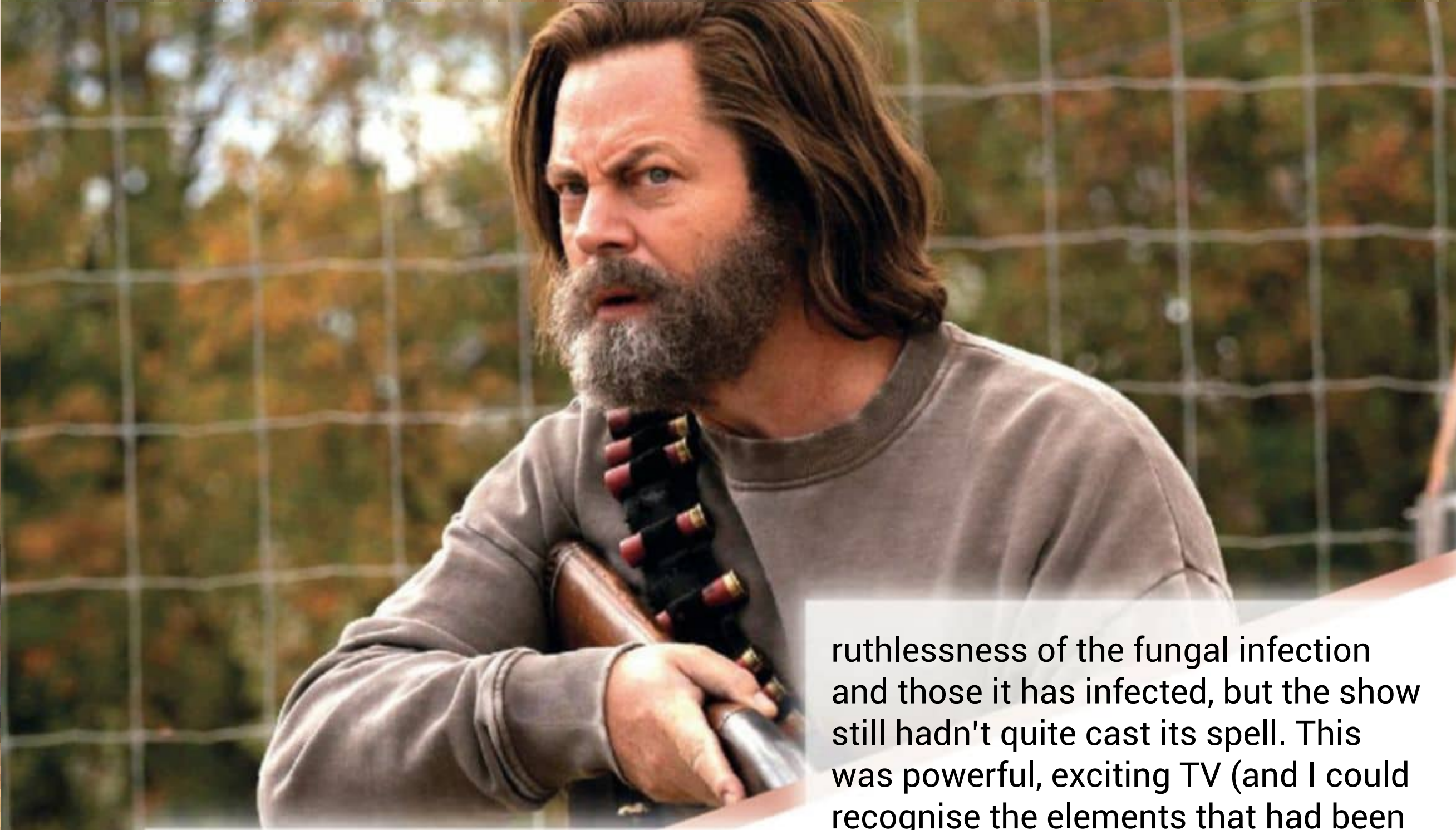
screen (and **The Last of Us** on TV has been crafted not only by the game's creator and writer Neil Druckmann, but also by Craig Mazin who wrote 2019's extraordinary **Chernobyl** miniseries) some changes are going to be made that won't always satisfy the scrutiny of the gaming hardcore. The TV medium allows the same story to be told in slightly different ways, its direction shaped not only by the original narrative

of the game (and its 2020 sequel) but by the need to cater for a TV audience who might not be familiar with the game and are likely to require a different type of storytelling. It's a fine balancing act, of course, but it seems that, by and large, Druckmann and Mazin have done a pretty damned good job so far in keeping the gaming community on side and capturing and keeping the

attention of its new TV audience. Conversely, you might well take the view (and I don't blame you) that as I'm not a gamer – and I'm so far from my safe space that I can't even see it from here – I don't know what I'm talking about and I really ought to stop pontificating about

games, gaming and gamers. And that's exactly what I'm going to do.

The Last of Us TV-style is great. As an unashamed fan of post-apocalyptic fiction – films, TV, books – it's ticking all my boxes. In the extended series opener, we're taken back to the late 1960s where a group of scientists (including John Hannah cameoing as epidemiologist Dr Neumann) on a TV talk show are discussing the very real threat of fungi, particularly a virulent (and real-world) fungus that hijacks and effectively zombifies ants. In 2003, the nightmare becomes a reality when an outbreak of mutated Cordyceps fungus leads to a global pandemic. Joel (Pedro Pascal), his daughter Sarah (Nico Parker), and his brother Tommy



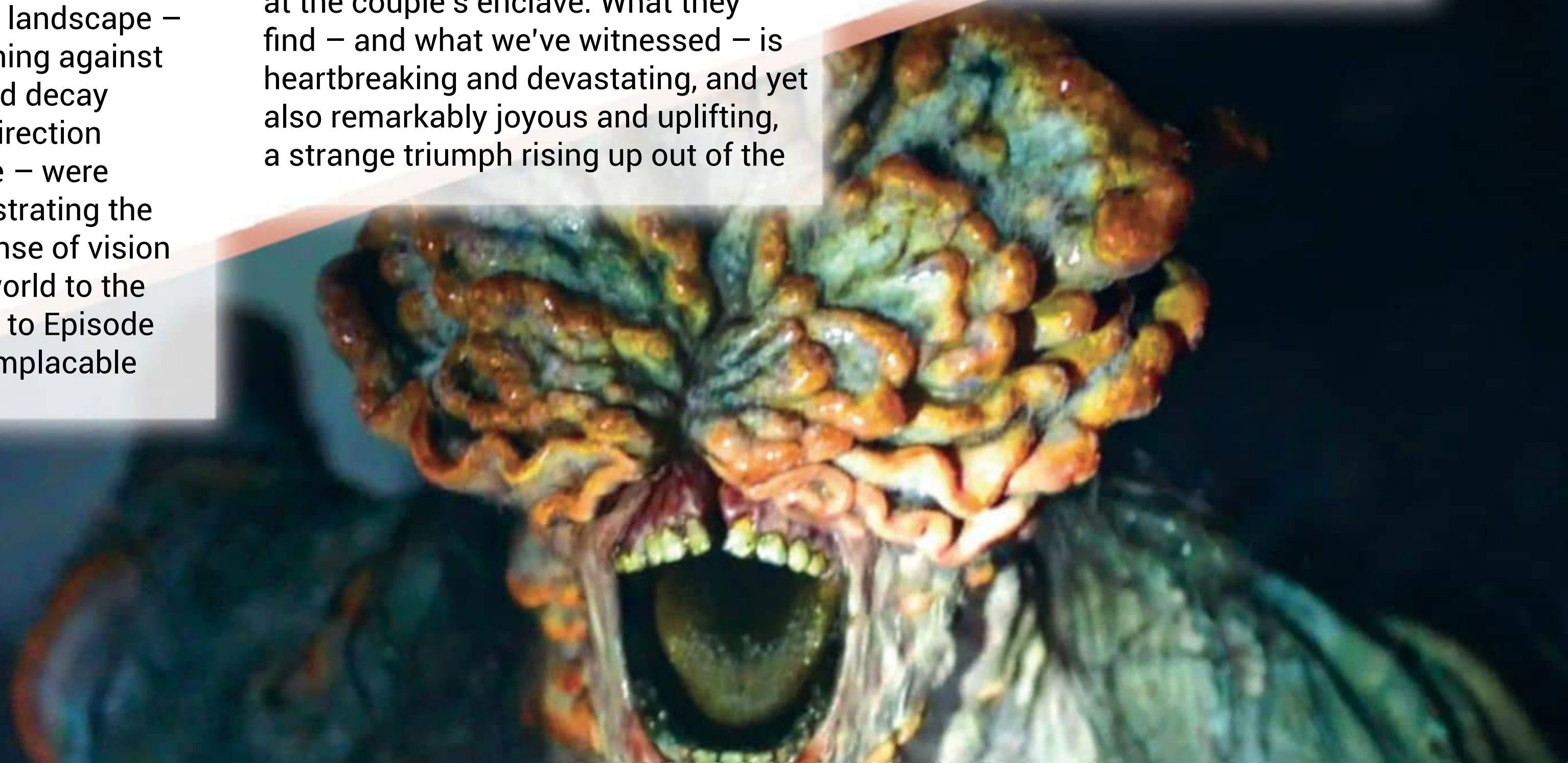
(Gabriel Luna) flee from Texas but tragedy strikes and tears them apart. Twenty years later, we find Joel eking out an existence as a smuggler with his partner Tess (Anna Torv) in the Boston quarantine zone managed by the ruthless militia-like Disaster Response Agency. The pair find themselves enlisted by a group of rebel Fireflies to escort a teenager named Ellie (Bella Ramsey) to the Massachusetts State House. Ellie, it turns out, is infected with the fungus but appears to be immune to its insidious effects. She's vital cargo – the future of the human race might well depend upon her immunity – and, despite his reluctance, Joel agrees to help transport her across hostile, devastated terrain infested with ferocious, mutated 'zombie' creatures including a breed of savage predators known as 'clickers'.

I'll admit that, while I thoroughly enjoyed the first two episodes of the series, I found it hard to really differentiate it from umpteen other similar post-apoc shows and films. The scenes of the initial collapse of society had a thrilling urgency to them and the sequences in Episode Two where Joel, Tess and Ellie pick their way through a shattered landscape – collapsing buildings leaning against one another plus ruin and decay stretching out in every direction as far as the eye can see – were utterly stunning, demonstrating the show's extraordinary sense of vision in bringing its crippled world to the screen. A 'shock ending' to Episode Two brought home the implacable

ruthlessness of the fungal infection and those it has infected, but the show still hadn't quite cast its spell. This was powerful, exciting TV (and I could recognise the elements that had been transported over from the game even without having ever played it) with an intelligence, power and integrity that so often eluded **The Walking Dead**, but I wasn't entirely sold that this was quite as special as I'd been led to expect. Episode Three, *Long, Long Time* (written by Mazin himself and directed by Peter Hoare, whose credits include the not-very-good 2011 **Doctor Who** episode *A Good Man Goes To War*) absolutely sealed the deal and pretty much took my breath away. We flash back to the beginning of the outbreak where paranoid survivalist Bill (Nick Offerman... yes, Ron Swanson himself!) has locked himself in his own secure compound as the world falls apart and lives in a strangely splendid isolation until fellow loner Frank (Murray Bartlett) wanders into his world. The story then unfolds across the next decade or so as the pair, desperately lonely, lost, and longing for human company, embark upon a long and fulfilling relationship punctuated by all the passions, frustrations, and furies that characterise any human relationship, whatever the gender. Joel and Tess are cleverly interwoven into the timeline of the narrative and the episode ends with Joel and Ellie, on the road, making a pit stop at the couple's enclave. What they find – and what we've witnessed – is heartbreaking and devastating, and yet also remarkably joyous and uplifting, a strange triumph rising up out of the

greatest human tragedy of all. It's a magnificent episode and a towering achievement. It's impeccably played by Offerman and Bartlett, effortlessly Emmy-worthy, subtly directed and scripted with a real poignancy and delicacy. There's a final shot that will take your breath away. *Long, Long Time* completely won me over and even if the show now falls off a cliff – and of course it won't – then this episode alone guarantees **The Last of Us** a place in the annals of the TV greats. Episode Four, *Please Hold to My Hand* is more traditional, as Joel and Ellie continue their 'road trip' and find trouble waiting for them in the ruins of Kansas City (and introducing the magnificent Melanie Lynskey from **Yellowjackets** as series-original character Kathleen, leader of the bandits who lurk in the shadows of the city). The episode shows Joel and Ellie slowly becoming closer, despite Joel's attempts to keep a distance between them. Some moments of gentle humour lighten both the mood and break down the barriers between the pair. Joel's not exactly been a 'fun guy' so far (see what I did there?), but Ellie, bright and breezy and full of curiosity about the world that died before she was born, is slowly helping him find his lost humanity years after everything he knew and loved was ripped away from him.

Comparisons are odious, we're told, but it's hard not to mention **The Walking Dead** when considering **The Last of Us** because of the superficial resemblance between the two. But where the former became bogged



down with characters, locations, motives, and increasingly desperate shock tactics, **The Last of Us** keeps its focus on its two main characters as they embark upon their perilous journey. Both series share in their DNA the idea that, in a world now overrun by hideous monsters, man still plays the most dangerous game and is still the most lethal monster of all. With ratings scaling new heights each week as the series finds new admirers and a second series already commissioned, we won't be seeing the last of **The Last of Us** (sorry) any time soon. What a way to start a new year in the TV Zone.

THE RIG

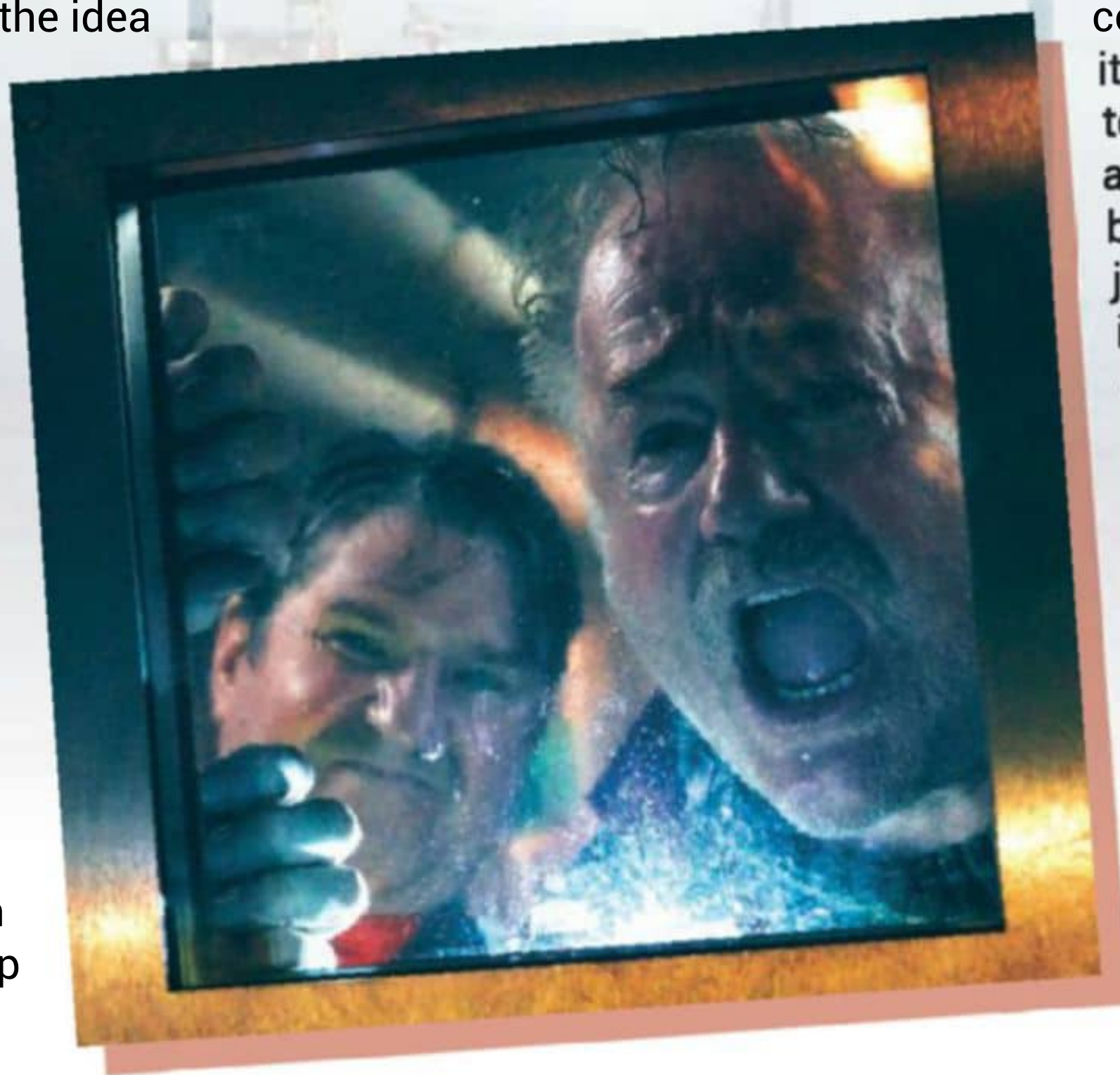
British TV, bless its little cotton socks, always struggles to keep up with the big boys Stateside when it comes to genre TV.

However, it's good to see that we're still capable of fighting the good fight occasionally. I had high hopes for Amazon's **The Rig**, which arrived as a 'boxset' on January 6th and which I binged across two days – but I suspect that might have been because if I'd stopped watching it at any point, I wouldn't have been inclined to go back.

The Rig is set aboard a remote Scottish oil rig out in the North Sea enveloped in a mysterious fog just as many of its crew are about to head home for shore leave. The fog clears and the rig is suddenly showered with a strange ash. Worse yet, spores in the fog start to infect crew members who suddenly begin to change as some strange lifeform lurking deep below the ocean floor exerts a baleful influence over them as they work to turn the rig into something else entirely.

There's actually a lot to like about **The Rig**. Although eight episodes is

too much to support the story, leading to some tedious character-based padding and some gaping illogicalities in the plot. There are some good, quite hard sci-fi ideas powering the narrative



(even though the series is actually sold as a 'supernatural thriller', which is resolutely isn't). It boasts a solid cast, led by Martin (**Line of Duty**) Compston, Iain (**Game of Thrones**) Glen, Owen (anything made in Wales) Teale, and Emily (**Schitt's Creek**) Hampshire as the imposing on-board representative of the oil company and luckily, a top scientist who is able to figure out exactly what's going on. The resolution to the story is pleasantly contemporary and relevant, and revolves around a sentience that has survived previous Extinction Level Events and has awoken to ensure that it survives another one. The show plays quite well with that sci-fi trope of 'loss of self/identity' as some of the crew fall under the thrall of the intelligence.

Unfortunately, it's scuppered slightly by some dodgy acting from a few of the supporting players and, more fatally, an unconvincing production. We're on a North Sea oil rig apparently, but it's quite clear that the (admittedly very impressive) oil rig set is entirely studio-bound; the greenscreen providing the sky

and seas around the rig just doesn't look convincing and when characters are out and about on the exterior of the rig, there's no sign of any particular discomfort, no sea-spray, and no cold air vapour breath. Occasionally, it looks as if someone remembered to turn on a wind machine to create a light breeze to ruffle the hair a bit. But with every 'outdoor' scene just screaming "this is all done indoors", the show loses any sense of believability the moment anyone steps outside and the dramatic impetus deflates like a balloon at the end of a child's birthday party. For all its faults, though, **The Rig** is watchable enough. A cliffhanger ending suggests that something fairly disastrous has happened on the mainland and sets up a second season that, presumably, won't be called **The Rig** because of... well, stuff that happens in the finale. It's a decent effort, but it just reminds us of the gulf that still exists

between British genre shows that can't help but feel a bit self-conscious about being genre shows and big American shows that love and embrace their stories and, more importantly, absolutely believe in themselves.

LOCKWOOD & CO

I tend to give YA series a bit of a swerve these days, mainly because there are just so damned many of them, but also because, with the best will in the world and even with the lights turned right down, I'm not able to pass myself off as 'young' these days, much less adult. But I was drawn like a moth to a flame to Netflix's **Lockwood & Co** because of its pedigree and because it's

a British series and, as we've long established, that's always going to pique my interest. Based on the book series by Jonathan





Stroud, the TV series was 'adapted' by the underrated Joe Cornish (**Attack the Block**, **The Kid Who Would Be King**), who also wrote and directed the first and last episodes. It's a clever, spooky scenario. Ghosts are suddenly manifesting all over the country and causing, understandably, a considerable degree of distress and disruption. Special 'ghost hunting' agencies staffed by teens and children who have the talent to 'sense' the ghosts have sprung up everywhere to fend off the spooks and protect the public. The series begins with Lucy Carlyle (Ruby Stokes) being forced to join one of these agencies by her pushy, cold-hearted mother. Circumstances lead to Lucy fleeing to

London, where she finds herself on the doorstep of the Lockwood & Co agency, run by charismatic teenager

Anthony Lockwood (Cameron Chapman) and his sidekick George (Ali Hadji-Heshmati – think a teenage Richard Ayoade). The company is struggling to stay afloat in a competitive ghost-hunting market, but with Lucy being especially ghost-sensitive, the boys are keen to bring her on board and keep her on board.

Lockwood & Co is good, spooky fun full of screeching, swooping ghosts, creepy country houses, haunted crypts and with a couple of ongoing story arcs bubbling away, so it's ideally suited for being watched as a serial or standalone romps. It might be a bit too intense for very young kids and while the first few episodes are refreshingly free of the dreary gratuitous swearing that seems to be *de rigueur* for all sassy YA



series, the mild cussing of the early episodes gives way to the dropping of the first 'f-bomb' in Episode Four. The series

therefore seems a bit schizophrenic, as if it wants to be family-friendly but isn't entirely sure that audience exists these days, so it has to put on its big-boy pants in an attempt to impress the audience that (apparently) enjoys all these edgy American potty-mouthed teen fantasy shows. It's a shame, because **Lockwood & Co** could, with a bit of soft retooling, have easily occupied the territory that was once the domain of the likes of **The Sarah Jane Adventures** or even the old classic 1970s kids' shows like **The**

Tomorrow People and **Ace of Wands**. But **Lockwood & Co**'s strength lie in its likeable, enthusiastic young cast, wedges of atmospheric London location filming (Episode Four's scenes filmed in and around the city's imposing Kensal Green cemetery are especially striking) and a core concept that's easily strong enough to support a couple more series if Netflix can just put away their 'cancellation' axe for a while.

HIS DARK MATERIALS

Huge kudos to the BBC/HBO/Bad Wolf for navigating the rocky, stodgy waters of Philip Pullman's **The Amber Spyglass** novel and managing to bring the **His Dark Materials** TV trilogy to a satisfying ending. It's been years since I read the book, but it was certainly the most challenging of the three titles – my memories mainly consist of unsettling sequences set in the Land of the Dead and pages and pages of stuff about the mulefa, cows with wheels that occupy the strange world that physicist Mary Malone finds herself stranded in. *Pages and pages* of the stuff that seemed to have little real connection to the main Lyra and Will storyline. This third series dispensed with a lot of the mulefa stuff – their appearances are mercifully infrequent – and focuses (if that's the right word for a series as wide-ranging as **HDM**) on Lyra and Will's quest to free the souls trapped in the Land of the Dead and the

ongoing battle of wills between Asriel (James McAvoy) and Marisa Coulter (Ruth Wilson) as they line up to fight the forces of the archangel Metatron. **His Dark Materials** is an extraordinary achievement considering the density and complexity of the source material and Bad Wolf is to be commended on seeing it through to the end in style (despite the UK TV audience shrinking



by two-thirds from the impressive opening numbers of the first episode of Series One back in 2019). It's been refreshing to see a series of this ambition occupying a prime time BBC 1 weekend slot as, by its nature, this was never really going to be a massive crowdpleaser due to its incredibly imaginative storylines and sometimes challenging themes. The visuals have been absolutely stunning (and we can only salivate at the prospect of the visuals *Bad Wolf* will bring to the new, budget-boosted **Doctor Who** later this year), bringing to the screen what always seemed impossible in the books. If the final episode was a little self-indulgent and made Peter Jackson's extended send-off to the denizens of Middle-earth in **The Return of the King** seem perfunctory and off-hand, it was a well-considered and emotional farewell to Lyra (Dafne Keen) and Will (Amir Wilson) at the end of their magnificent adventures. I suspect **HDM** will benefit from a re-watch of the entire series now it's completed and will eventually

her cold, psychopathic tendencies. Inevitably, *Wednesday* doesn't bond well with her fellow students, but soon her attentions are occupied by a murder-mystery involving a monster roaming the school grounds and some long-buried family secrets. It's hardly surprising that **Wednesday** quickly became one of Netflix's biggest ever hits (as measured by whatever mysterious metric Netflix uses), as it's gloriously enjoyable stuff boasting a gorgeous production design, archly witty storylines and a properly Gothic aesthetic. This is largely thanks to the involvement of Tim Burton, who directed the first four episodes, bringing an appropriate level of *spooky* and *ooky* to this invigorating new look at one of fiction's most celebrated dysfunctional families. More please... by next *Wednesday*, if possible. Jacob Batalon steps out from Tom Holland's spider-web shadow as the star of **Reginald the Vampire** (Sky/Now in the UK) based on the **Fat Vampire** books

by Johnny B. Truant. This is, of course, on an entirely different level in every sense from, say, **The Last of Us** and **His Dark Materials**. Cheap and cheerful, *Reginald the Vampire* is the story of insecure, socially-awkward Reginald Andres (Batalon), whose life changes dramatically (i.e. it ends) when he's bitten by vampire Maurice Miller (Mandela Van Peebles). But Reginald finds that life amongst the glossy, sophisticated vampire elite isn't that much different from life amongst the living, and that he's still an outsider, albeit one who can live forever. It's an entirely disposable series – you'll forget it even as you're watching it – but Batalon is always charming company and it's occasionally quite funny. However, its low-rent production (those Day-Glo sets!) and lack of visual ambition make it one to

find its place as one of the best and most respected literary fantasy screen adaptations of the modern age.

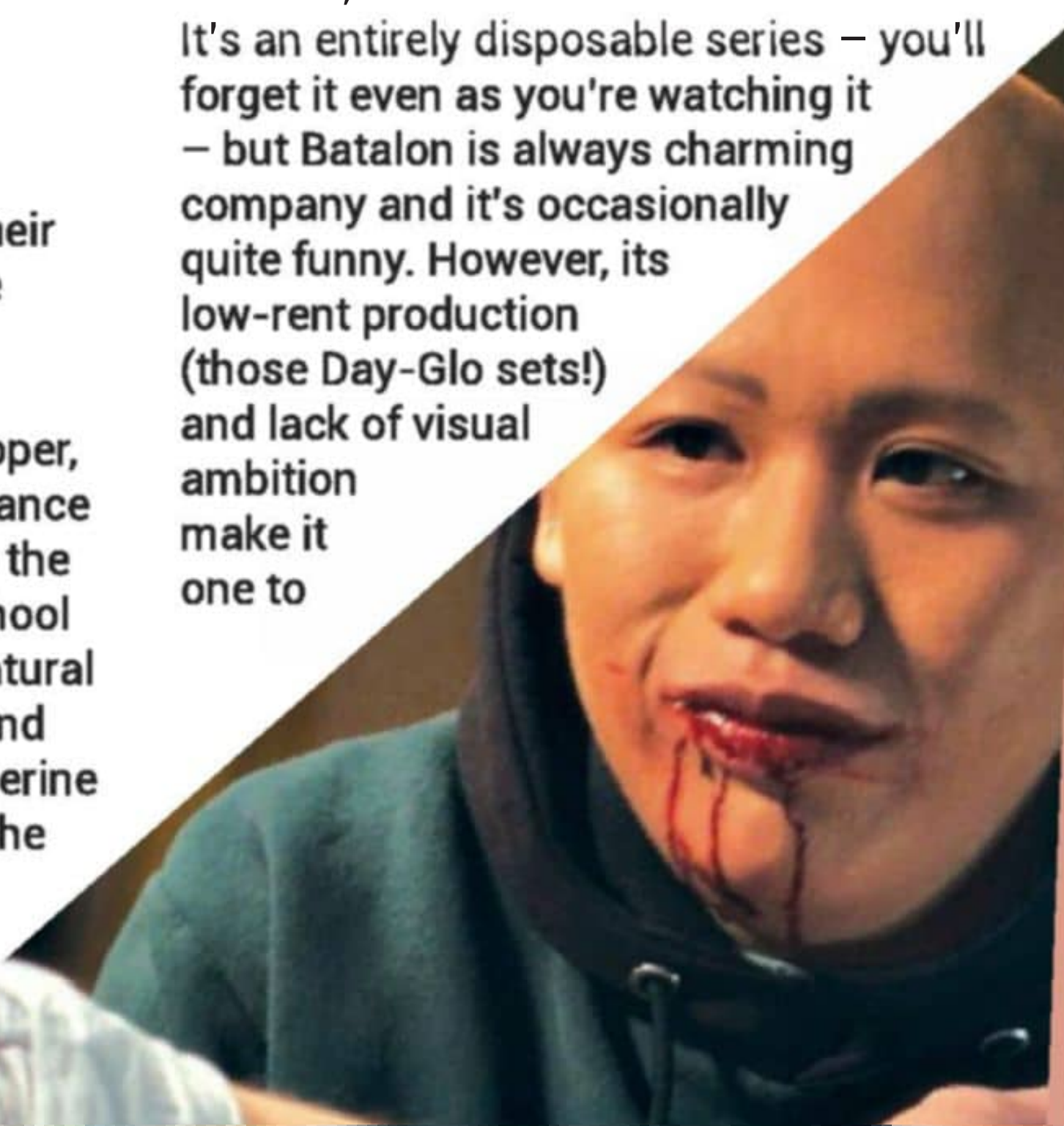
ALSO WATCHING...

Netflix scored another massive home run with the first series of their clever, witty, refreshingly dark take on **Wednesday**, the young **enfant terrible** of the legendary Addams Family. *Wednesday Addams* (a proper, charismatic, star-making performance by Jenna Ortega) is shipped off to the Nevermore Academy, a private school for teenage outcasts with supernatural inclinations, by parents **Morticia** and **Gomez** (delicious cameos by Catherine Zeta-Jones and Luiz Guzmán) in the hope that she can be cured of



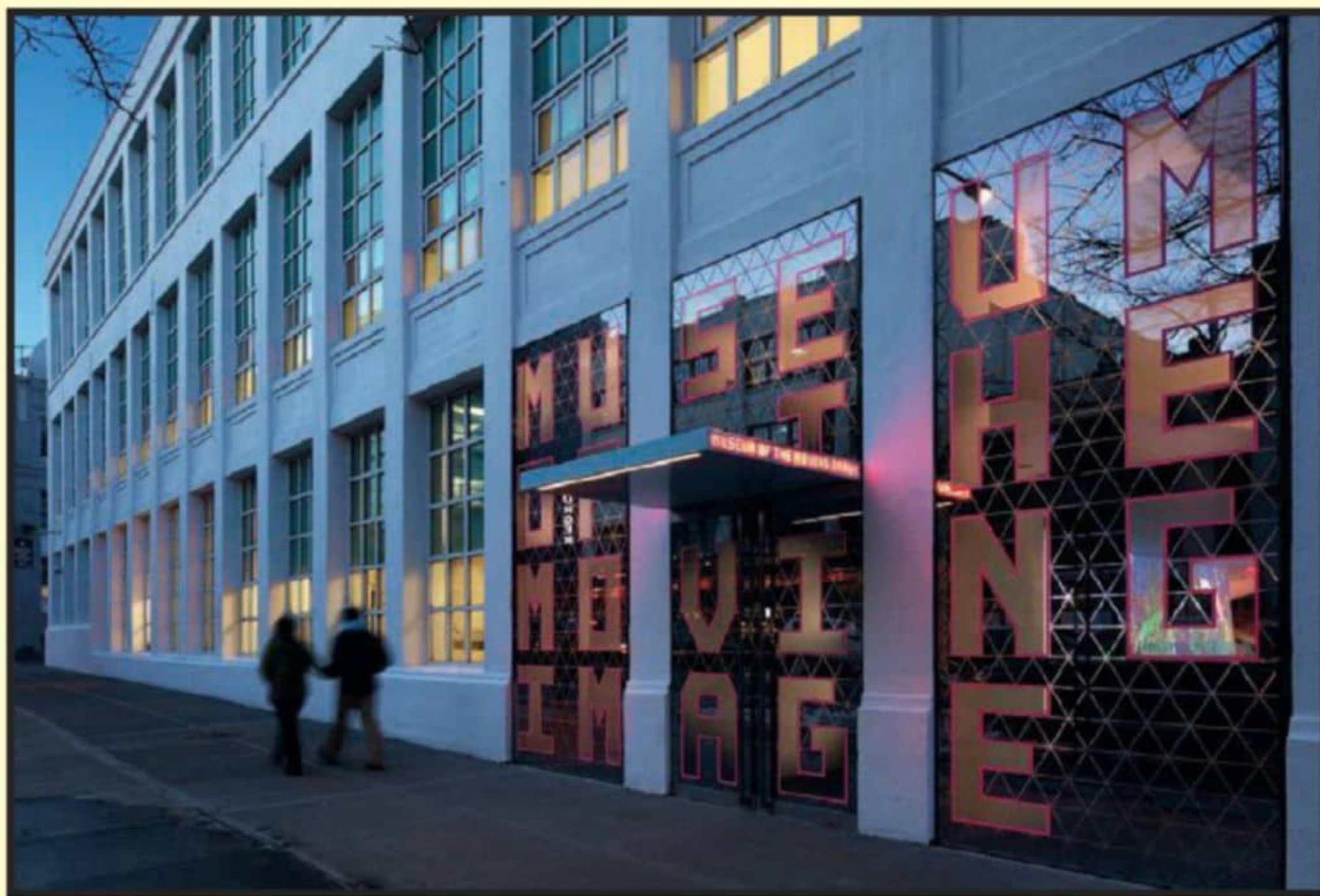
watch only if there's nothing much else grabbing your attention. Exploring Netflix in search of something a bit *different* recently, I stumbled across **Alice in Borderland**. I think I had been vaguely aware of it (Netflix dropped its second season of eight episodes on December 22nd last year), but on investigation I found myself quickly immersed in a Japanese series that, strangely, predates the cultural phenomenon of **Squid Game**, but is initially pretty much the same story but with a bit more of a sci-fi twist. Three young Japanese teenage tearaways find themselves in a suddenly deserted Tokyo and forced to compete in lethal games, their difficulty suggested by playing cards, to extend visas that, once expired, result in participants being obliterated by lasers shot from the sky. The first few episodes of *Alice in Borderland* (it's based on a popular manga series that debuted back in 2010) are gripping and terrifying stuff, especially the episode where participants are chased around the outer corridors of a faceless tower block by machine gun-wielding assassins wearing horse masks. The show has

the same casual disregard for human life as *Squid Game* – teens are being shot to pieces and slaughtered week after week and the massacre in Episode Seven is especially brutal. The series goes off the boil later when we arrive at the so-called sanctuary known as 'the Beach', but the end-of-series reset suggests that we're in for more familiar fun and bloody games in Season Two, which I'll most likely report on in the next issue along with... well, who knows? That's the fun of life in the **TV Zone** these days, you never know what's around the next corner...



IT'S ONLY A MOVIE

A Column by JORDAN ROYCE



The Fabulous Museum of the Moving Image - Astoria - New York City

Whenever you read a review, and you see the word *didacticism*, you are pretty much guaranteed to be dealing with a cunt. I apologise for the use of that word (didacticism, not cunt). However, when you see a cunt, you really do have a duty to call that cunt out. After perusing the reviews of **Avatar: The Way of Wankers**, I have seen 18 uses of the word. That is a lot of cunts. A cuntacious amount, one might say.

Didacticism means to instructionally inform via an art form. I did warn you that we were dealing with a bunch of cunts.

Did **Avatar: The Way of Wankers** really inform or instruct. Myself and Kris Heys (the Editor-in-Chief of this very magazine) found out the hard way on a Christmas trip to New York City and Las Vegas.

The trip to New York was supposed to be a classic Christmas experience. It was supposed to be a short 6-day sojourn to soak up the atmosphere and take in some of that magical atmosphere that film fans adore. Macy's shop window. The famous **Rockettes Christmas Spectacular**. The Space Shuttle Enterprise. The Midtown comic book store. The Museum of

the Moving Image, and iconic film locations on every block. The list is endless. It is almost a pilgrimage for movie buffs, and Crimbo is the sweet spot for *that* magical atmosphere.

Unfortunately, this straightforward trip did present more than a few challenges. You can hear the full details on the **STARBURST Radio Podcast**. It went a bit south the moment we arrived as a weather bomb hit Manhattan Island, plunging the temperature to minus 18. Usually, one is tucked up warm thousands of miles away when watching Americans being hit by hurricanes and the like. It was a little disturbing to be watching doom-ridden weather forecasts on TV with ourselves at ground zero. Nevertheless, we rose to the occasion and managed to finally see the remains of the 1966 World's Fair at Flushing Meadows, and pretty much everything we had planned, but the Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria, New York City, turned out to be beyond any of our expectations.

The museum was currently hosting an impressive **Waking Dead** exhibit. Tons of props, costumes, etc. They even had Glenn's post Neganised head. This exhibit was worth the admission price alone. Also, in permanent residence,

there is the **Jim Henson Exhibition**. Again, worth the admission price alone. All the gang were on display, most of the original puppets from **Sesame Street** to **The Muppet Show** cast, and everything in between. This collection was a joy to behold and was very focused on informing young people about the art form of puppetry itself, not to merely look at a mind-blowing collection of props and archival video. It certainly got the Kris Heys seal of approval. This interactional approach was evident throughout the museum, and young children could get involved with editing, stop motion, and altering dialogue tracks. There is much more to see at this essential attraction for movie fans. No trip to the Big Apple would be complete without a day spent in this joyous temple of filmmaking homage and education. It is easily one of the best museums in the world.

The weather improved over the next few days to a tropical minus 1, so we could venture out more to places like Harlem. It was the least tourist-leaning part of the city and still looking as it did when **Live and Let Die** was shot on location fifty years ago (and YES, we ate at a soul food restaurant). Despite the weather playing ball, the fact that a maniac was loose on the subway, stabbing random people, added another worrying factor. When he struck the subway platform next to the hotel where we were staying, things started to feel a little surreal.

All of this time, I had started to hear about the **Avatar** sequel, and I was putting off a viewing. The next few days, we wrapped up visiting the last few places of interest and ended up stopping a drugstore robbery. It was probably ill-advised, but my wife got stuck in, and the manager that the scumbag was punching was able to give as good as she got. Probably not a wise move (guns and knives spring to mind), but sometimes you make decisions in a flash. Finally, our time in New York was over. I was relieved we had managed to have an eventful time and were leaving in one piece. Myself, my wife Charlie, and Kris set off for the

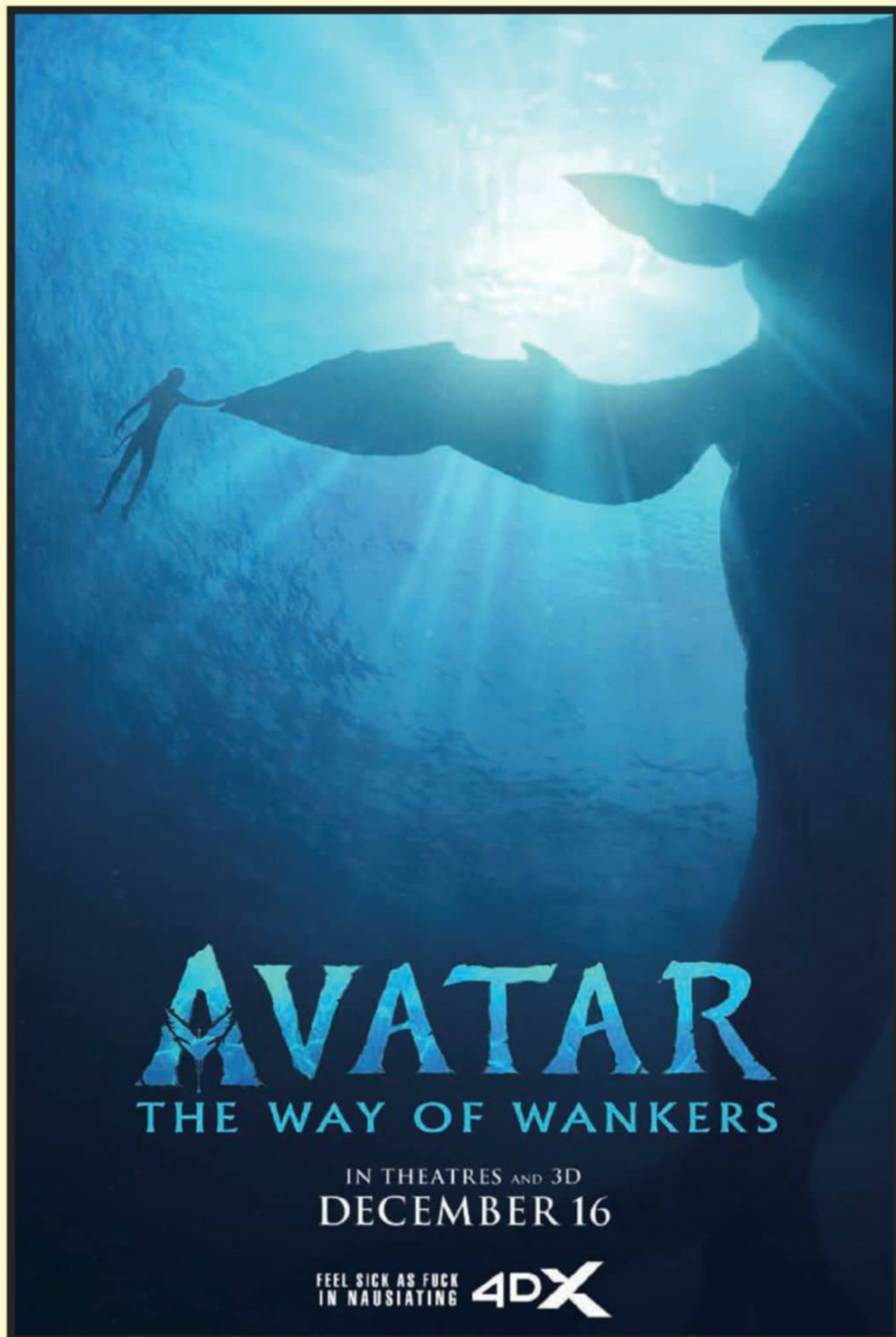
airport. I expressed relief that nothing else could happen now, and the taxi broke down in a reasonably scary part of the New York outskirts.

When we arrived in Las Vegas, it was time to face the music. We were recording a show and needed to see the **Avatar** sequel. Long-term readers or listeners of the radio show will know that I have no love for **Avatar**. I appreciated the renaissance of 3D that it ignited, but it was a sub-par James Cameron flick as far as I was concerned. All the usual characters and tropes were present. Bad military guy and corporate greed front and centre, but I had seen it all before when he was at his peak. **Aliens** and **The Abyss** were entertaining. **Avatar** was just a tired old rehash of his glory days. In the years after **Avatar**, even the 3D explosion wore thin, with crappy conversions becoming the norm. Most interestingly, until recently, **Avatar** had been forgotten. It secured the most significant box office take in cinema history, but had left no pop culture imprint. No residual zeitgeist. No one ever seemed to mention it. It was forgotten.

Even when Camsy announced his series of **Avatar** sequels, the buzz did not seem to be there, yet **Avatar: The Way of Wankers** was released and started inexplicably drawing folks in. The box office take started to grow. It was as if old Camsy had some magic beacon. There was no evidence of any prior interest from the wider movie-going audience, and yet the tickets were selling. The screenings were filling up. Was Camsy a warlock? Was this some mass hypnosis? Or had he actually made a film that surpassed the original and was a stone-cold classic?

We booked our tickets and even got our mate Derryl, who lives in Vegas and works in the special effects industry, to check it out. So we booked the 4DX tickets without realising that this was the combo that included the HFR 48 frames per second version, and settled down to drink some of Camsy's Kool-Aid.

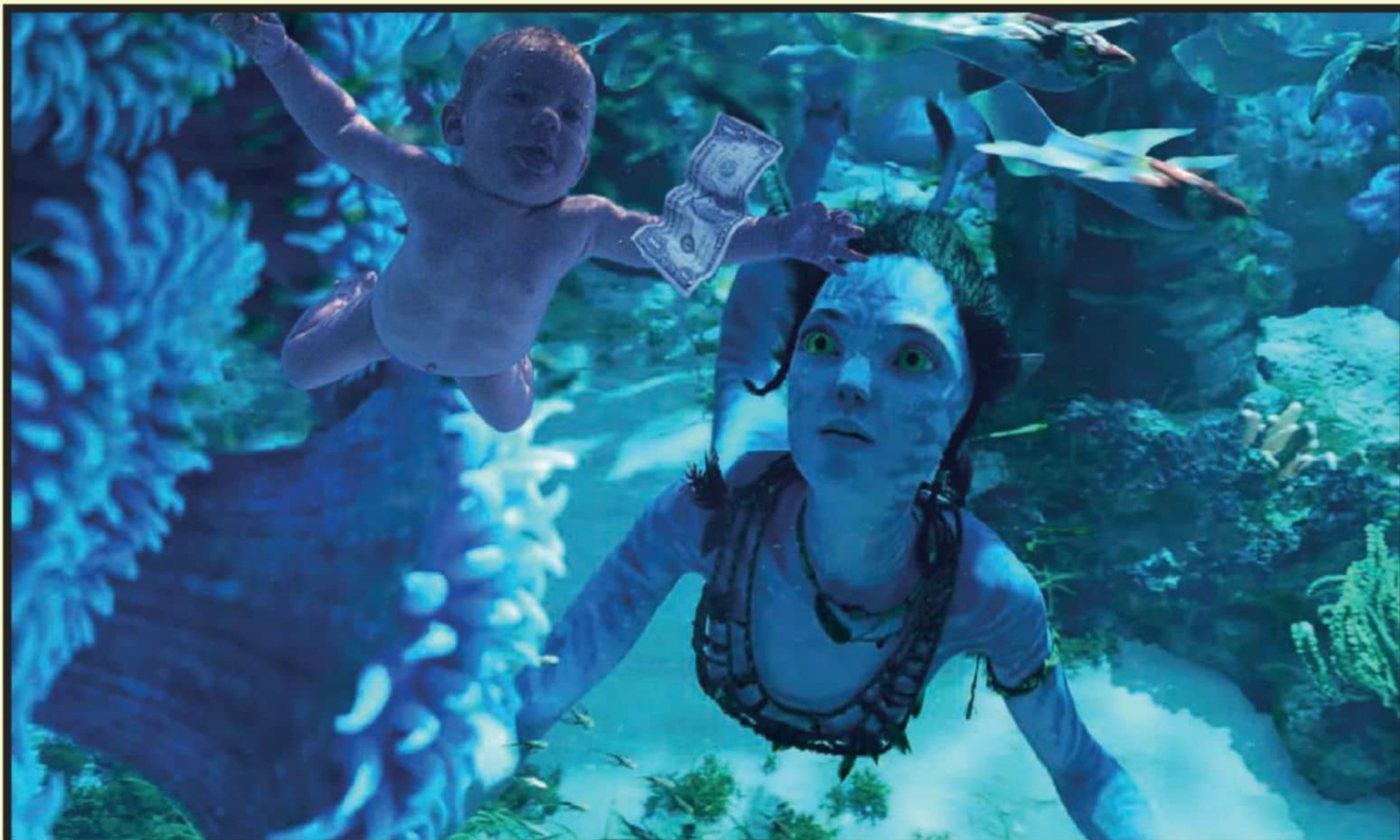
Avatar: The Way of Wankers was a crime against cinema. An experience so awful I was begging for it to end after only ten minutes of a painful onslaught. It is hard to easily dissect the sheer awfulness of this flick due to the convergence of 3D, high frame rate, and 4DX. 4DX is a particularly gruesome experience that I had better get out of the way first. As we queued for the tickets, I joked to everyone that they had better be careful, or the drinks would be sloshing everywhere. No one was laughing ten minutes later as we were being slammed around



in a pneumatic chair that had gotten lost in transit to a hardcore theme park ride. Every movement on the screen triggered an extreme backlash from this bizarre form of torture. In addition, we had water sprayed onto our 3D glasses every time the stuff appeared on screen. Anytime someone was flying through the air you got wind blasted in yer mush. If anything happened behind the characters on screen, you would get a solid dig in the back, and a chiropractor didn't design this. If you got fortunate, you could get combos of these as the chair hurled you forward into the spray of water, then delivered a well-timed punch in the back to send you falling off the seat. Unfortunately, I was correct about the drinks, and this heady experience was further enhanced by the sloshing of Kris' lager that managed to inebriate

many on the seats in front, with very little libation enjoyed by himself. Ten minutes of this on a theme park ride would be a laugh. Instead, this was 192 minutes of brutality. Pavlovian conditioning had kicked in after the first hour, and we were collectively wincing when an action scene approached, and we prepared for another round of abuse. I fucking hated this. What a nightmare this was! I pray this disappears before some bellend spots an opportunity to re-release **Marathon Man** in this format.

I also pointed out previously what a lousy idea high frame rate is outside of theme park rides. HFR is nothing new. Douglas Trumbull pioneered *Showscan* way back in the 1980s to be used for the movie **Brainstorm**. This was in 60fps. It was going to



Sometimes It Aint About The Art - It's All About The Moolah!

be the future of cinema. Except it wasn't. It was relegated to theme park rides. Peter Jackson also failed to inspire a sea change with those terrible **Hobbit** movies, again in HFR. Your brain is used to seeing 24fps and can see more than that. Your brain adds frames. It interpolates. When you suddenly provide *extra* frames, your brain still needs to add some interpolation. This is why it looks so bad. In addition, should you watch enough of these high frame rate atrocities, you risk training yourself to see these as standard. Watching **Casablanca** would seem like a PowerPoint presentation.

The high frame rate version of **Avatar: The Way of Wankers** is borderline unwatchable. It is like watching a benchmarking demo for a graphics card.

The film itself was an insult to the cinema. This is *not* cinema. It is a bad cartoon with elements of virtual reality immersion, but it isn't cinema. It is worrying that something this poor can seemingly appeal to the masses.

This experience is an unfortunate triumph of technology over creativity. It is *immersion*, not cinema. Once all of the "oohs" and "awws" have stopped, you are left with a plot as thin as vegan broth and characters so bland and shallow that extinction would be a mercy. The film is just a

do-over of a movie that itself was a clumsy allegory for the colonisation of North America by Europeans. There is supposed to be *something* beyond the tech. A story. Character growth. Big cinema *moments*. It's a good job I wasn't holding my breath for any of these old-fashioned ideals.

Avatar: The Way of Wankers has a fundamental premise that pertains to be more than empty pseudo-philosophical twaddle. The humans come back because they can. Despite the previous instalment waving them goodbye forever [**Sequel War Crime Number 1**: Never undermine the last movie's goodwill or ending], Sam Worthless and his family bugger off like cowards and make friends with other Na'vi that have paddle arms to help them swim. There is another final battle with the same boring army grunt that was killed at the end of the first flick [repeating **Sequel War Crime Number 1**]. This Quaritch character was Camsy's most cookie-cutter bad guy, and now he is indestructible. No one dies anymore. Anyone can come back. There are zero stakes.

So here we are again with another expensive ripoff of **Ferngully**, a masterpiece by comparison.

I hate to mention watery phrases, as it is low-hanging fruit, but this movie is bloated and astoundingly boring. After only 5 minutes, it

almost seems like a dry ice machine starts dispensing *mind fog* as your consciousness struggles to keep the lights on. A 13-year wait for this? What an insulting waste of half a billion dollars.

There have been no lessons learned during this interim between instalments, particularly regarding the leading man. Sam Worthless is back. The underdue return of the most prominent plank of wood to ever bag a leading role. Worthless actually manages to take his lameness to new heights here. His human-form has been replaced, and yet he manages to make a ten-foot-tall blue guy with a fucking tail boring! It's like his X-Men power. He can shut down the most active minds within minutes of witnessing any of his borothonic performances. Camsy thinks of Sam Worthless as a national treasure, so let's bury him and lose the map!

Now we have dealt with the only actor cut from the same cloth as Pinocchio, let's have a chat about the only reason to heap any praise on this disastrous waste of bum-shifting. Those special effects...

Are they special? Seriously. I am reaching deep here. Can you honestly tell me that you never had any problem with consistency? Can you say it was all mindblowing and cutting-edge? A bizarre pull and push was going on, almost a chase after something elusive.

The further the journey towards photo-realism, the more the uncanny valley appeared. The high frame rate and 3D only further augmented this aesthetic of inauthenticity. Instead of creating a backdrop, the visual effects take over the entire experience, drowning out the acting, music, and any attempt at character arcs. Instead, this provides an immersive theme park ride, not a movie. This isn't *only a movie*, it isn't even a movie. Instead, it's a 20-minute theme park ride stretched out to an insane, outrageous 192-minutes. It is a cinematic travesty, and its box office success is a problem. It is dragging cinema down a depressive path where a soulless chain of computer algorithms is replacing the joy and wonder of this precious art form. A jarring ballet of aggressive digital zooms and nauseating cuts.

Properties such as **Star Wars** and **Star Trek** don't always get it right, but they don't forget to tell a good story. They don't drown out everything under a tsunamic onslaught of computerised imagery.



Size Certainly Matters To Camsy!



There Is Nothing Quite Like Drowning In Digital Art!

I have already dealt with the wafer thin characterisations, which were not helped by a script that appeared to have been composed of randomly generated greeting card messages. These are the children of the Moonpig generation. Does Camsy actually spend any time around young people? Why would these Na'vi kids shoot the breeze with all the "dude", and "bro" speak? Would exposure to a handful of humans corrupt a culture with such pervasiveness? Amongst these cartoon characters were a few talented thespians. I felt sorry for poor Edie Falco, who I would imagine once she watched the final cut would have rather been just another hidden member of this Blue Man Group tribute band. Kate Winslet was suitably hidden though. This isn't going next to **The Reader** on her wiki page, that's for sure. At least she got to play a character with feet as big as she has in real life. It's the small blessings that add up.

Camsy wants to be remembered for pushing cinema forward. The 3D renaissance he can rightly take credit for. Depending on how you feel about it, you may find that to be a good or bad distinction. The geezer has achieved some fantastic things, but enough is enough. **Avatar**. **The Way of Wankers** is an inflexion point where cutting-edge tech like this is distorting the experience of cinema and filmmaking. This movie is a creation of Camsy in Frankenstein mode. He is not asking if he should create, merely doing it because he can. Like Frankenstein, he has created something lacking a

soul. A cold, clinical piece of work. One that should be presented at a tech expo and not in a cinema.

Camsy used to be a creative powerhouse like Carpenter or Landis in their heyday. Now he is more akin to a late-era Cecil B. DeMille, creating a towering spectacle with zero content at its core. The technical has suffocated the wonder of cinema, and if we are not careful, there may soon be a point of no return from this land of inauthentic artistry.

On a final note. Even humour died on Pandora. What a joyless blockbuster this was. I have never seen a blockbuster with ZERO laughs. Even **The Road** managed a few and a cheeky product placement.

Sadly, humour is not compatible with a movie that takes itself this seriously. Instead, it's a movie full of cartoony blue folk that thinks it's fucking **Spartacus**. This lack of self-awareness and lofty spiritual aspirations further push this beasts arrogant nature. It's arrogance to the point of infuriating to watch.

The only actual humour is a line of dialogue from the Metkayins Chieftain's daughter, Reya. "The way of water has no beginning and no end". Sadly nothing happens in the middle, either.



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and hosts the STARBURST Radio Show every Wednesday 8pm until 10pm GMT on Fab Radio International - www.fabradiointernational.com
he also hosts The Mancunian Candidates political talkshow
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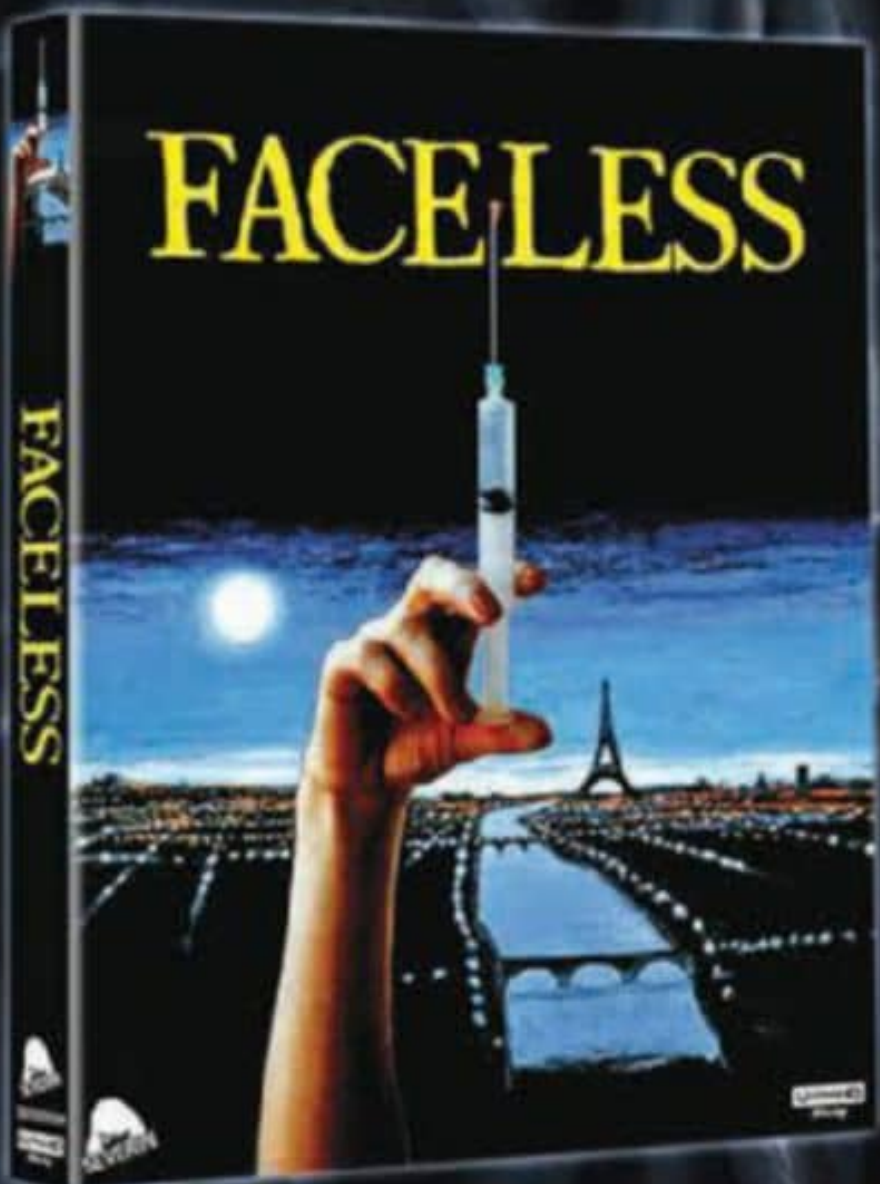
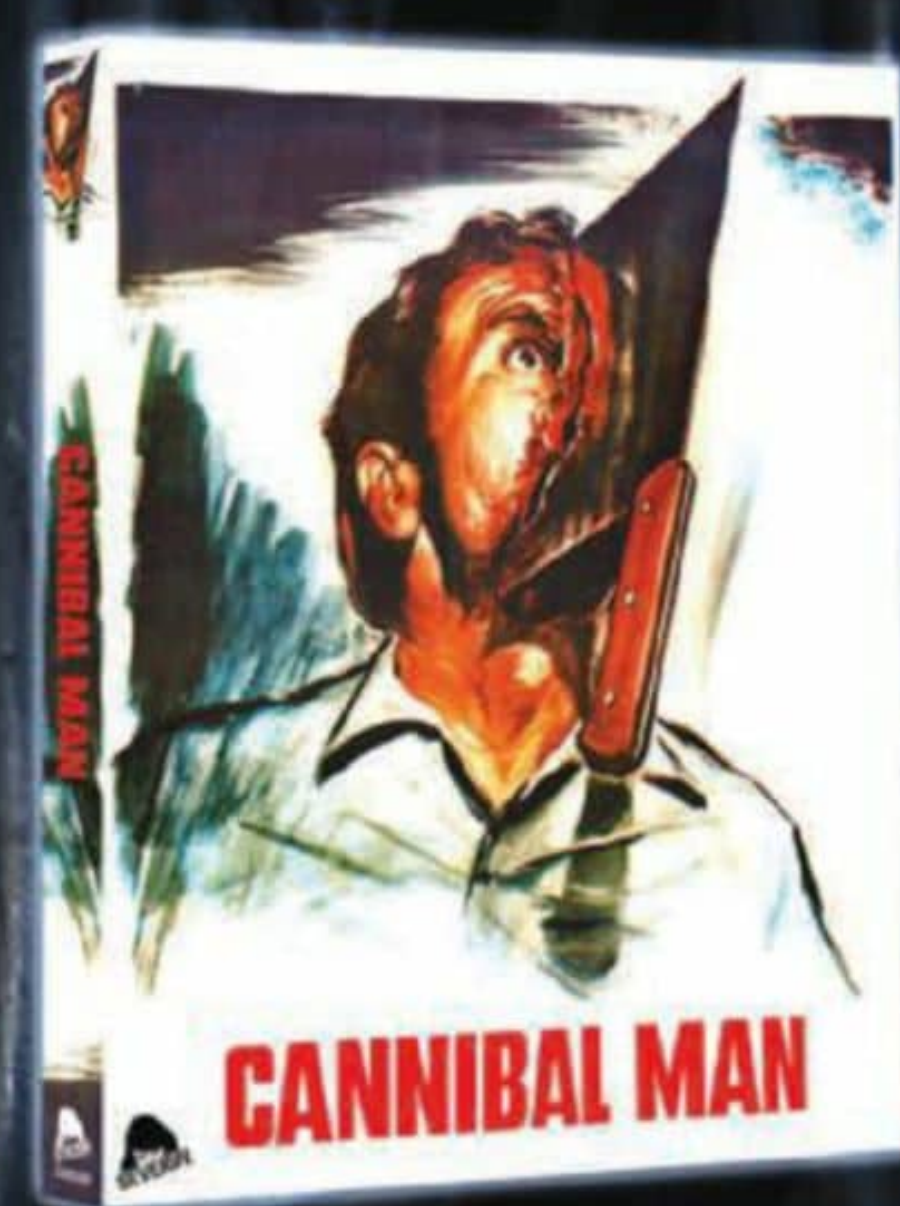
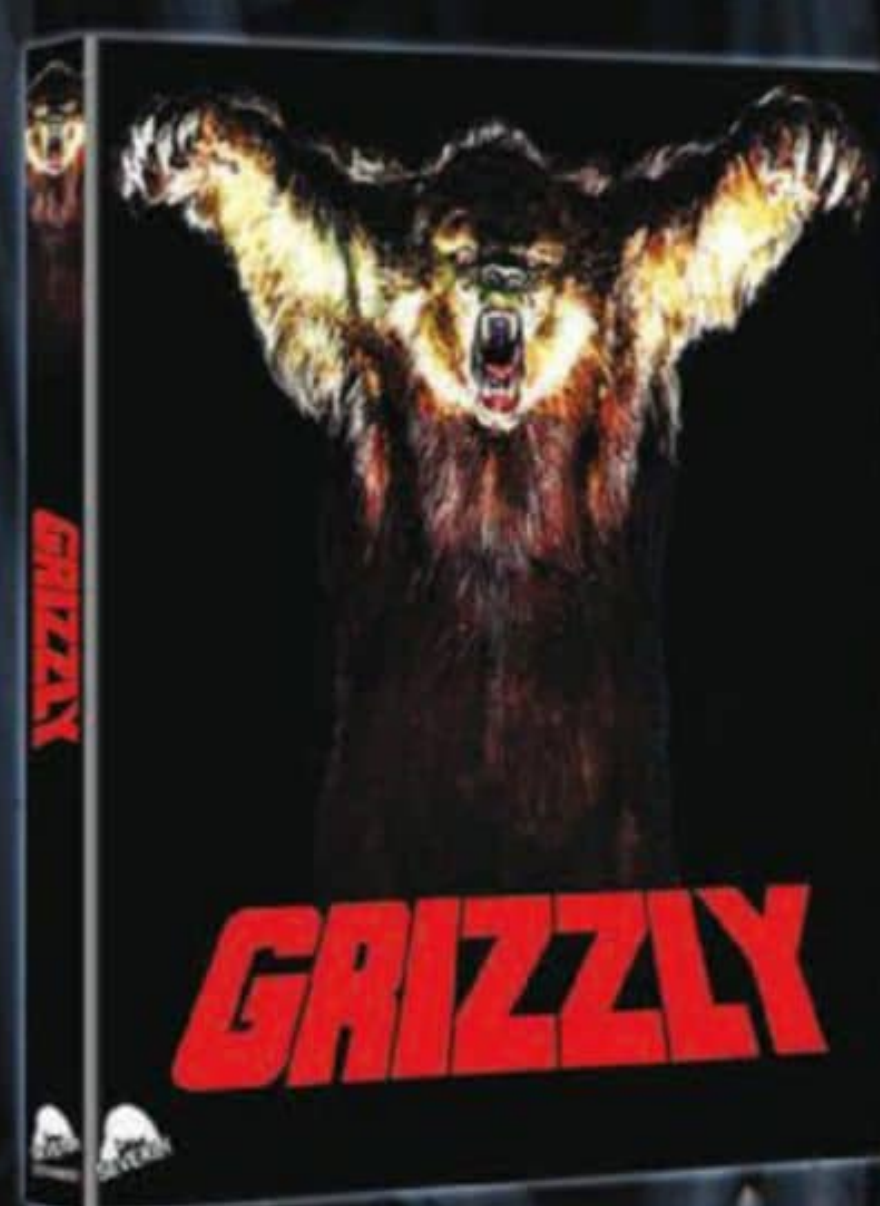
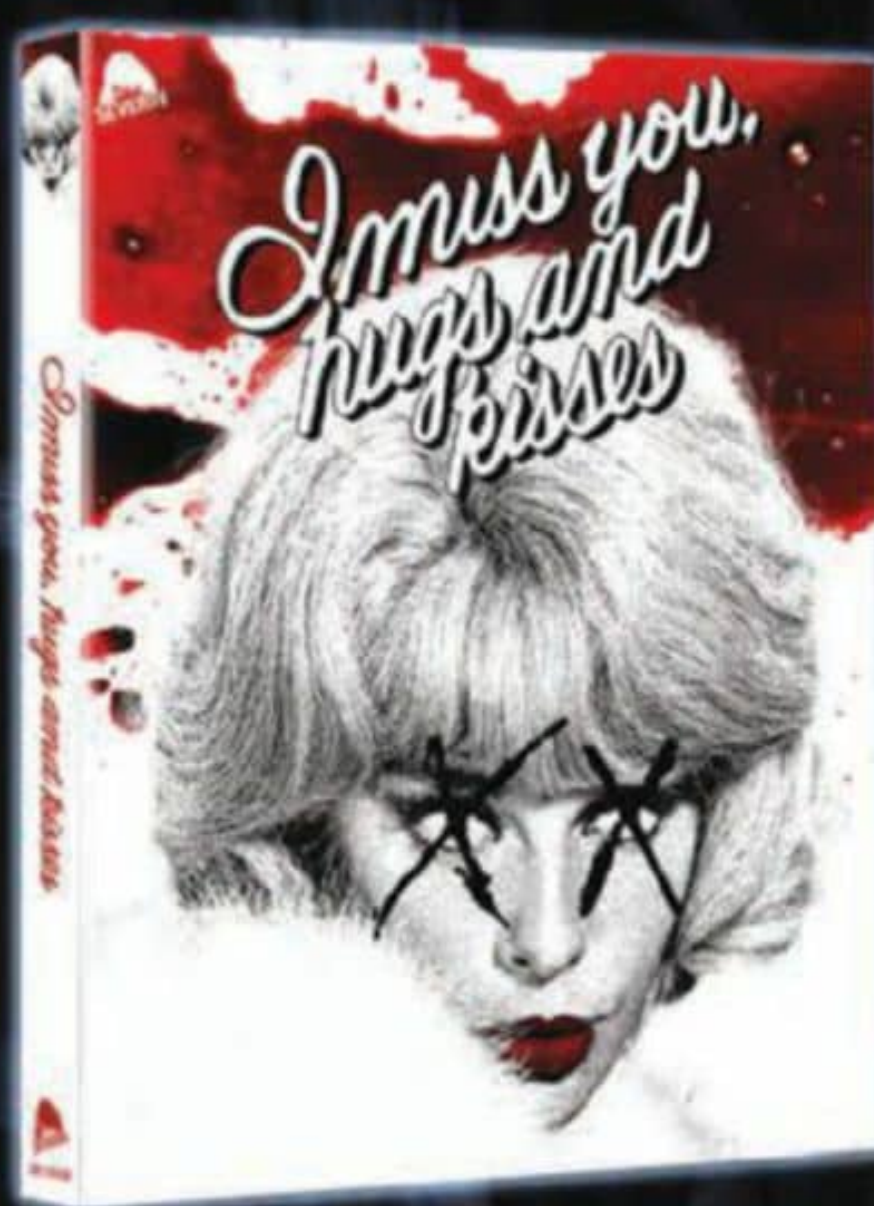
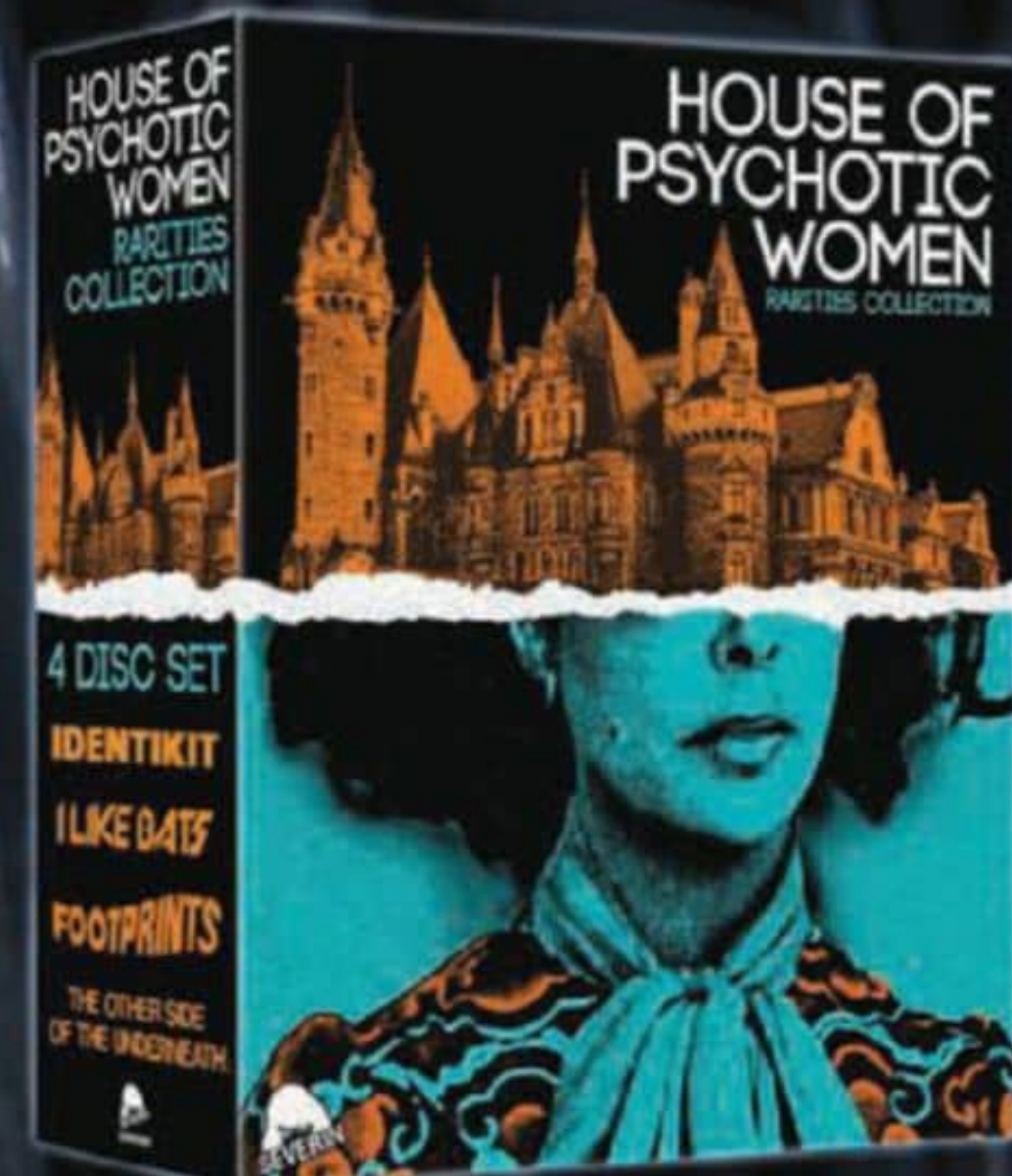
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